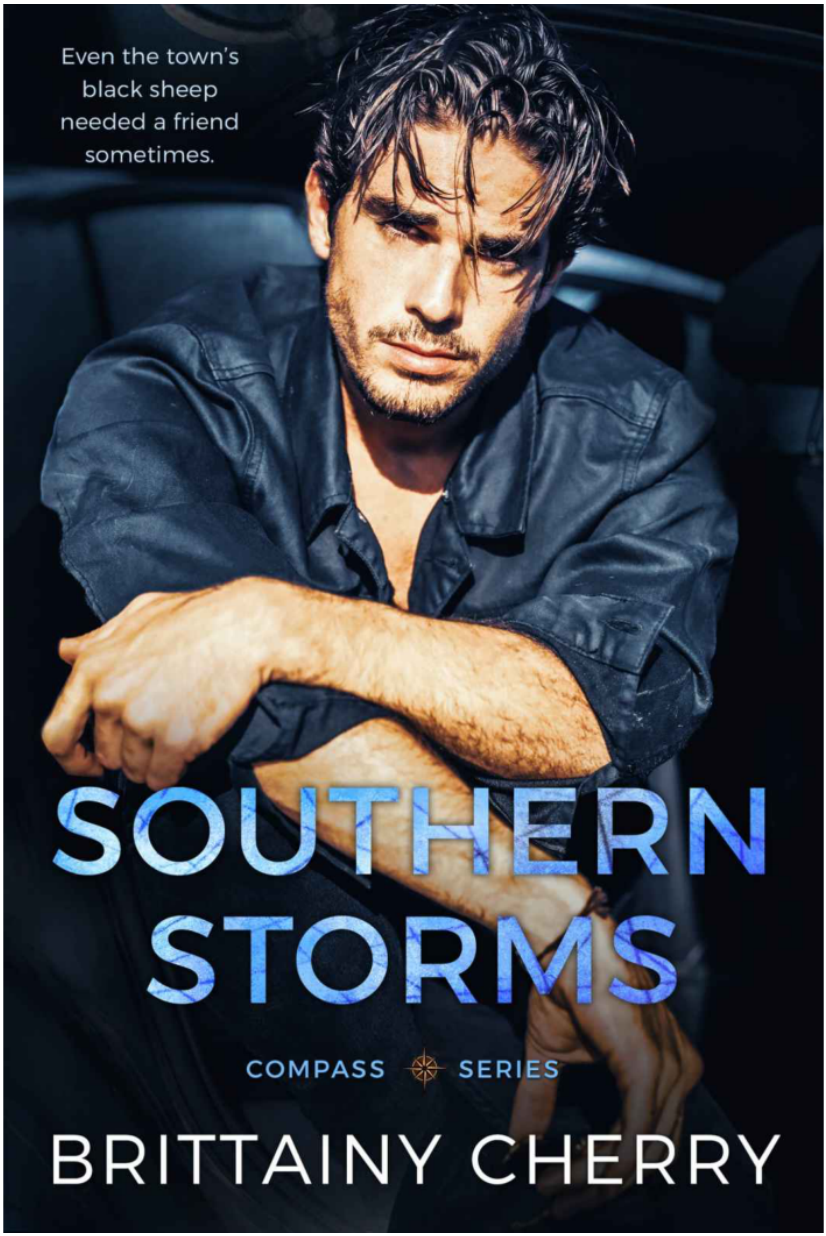
Even the town's black sheep needed a friend sometimes.
SOUTHERN STORMS
COMPASS SERIES
BRITTAINY CHERRY

Southern Storms

Brittainy Cherry

BCherry Books, INC

Southern Storms

By: Brittainy C. Cherry

Southern Storms
Southern Storms
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To every heart that needs a little healing,
this one's for you.

Contents

Quote
Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29

Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Epilogue
First Dance
The Elements Series by Brittainy C. Cherry
Also by Brittainy C. Cherry
Acknowledgments
About the Author

“Thy fate is the common fate of all; into each life some rain must fall.”

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Prologue

Jax
Thirteen years old

Sun,

I'm sorry if I upset you with my last few letters. I don't know what to do. Everything is ruined because of me, and I don't have anyone to talk to anymore. My brother hates me. My dad hates me. He hates me so much, and I don't know what to do. I can't stop crying, and I want to run away forever and never look back. You said I could run away to you if I needed to, remember? Can I? Can I come stay with you? Maybe your parents can pick me up. You know my address. If you come, I'll be ready. I hate it here. It's all my fault. I want to run away. Please, let me run away to you.

Are you afraid of me now because of what I did? Is that why you won't write me back? It was a mistake. I swear, it was a mistake. I didn't mean to do it. She was my best friend, like you are my best friend.

Please write me back.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

I don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to feel like this anymore. I hate this. I'm sorry.

Please write me back.

Please, Sun. I need you.

-Moon

1

Kennedy
Present day

“Please don’t embarrass me tonight,” Penn said as he fixed his tie for the fiftieth time that night.

The wallpaper of our home was infused with cigarette smoke and broken promises. My husband had broken some promises, and I’d shattered a few all on my own. Was that what marriage was? Days twisting into weeks that morphed into months and years of broken promises? The words “I do” came with fine print no one ever truly read. We scrolled past the terms of agreement and clicked the “I agree” box at the end, not knowing about the hidden consequences we were signing up for.

I’d failed my vows, but he had failed his, too.

Promises, promises, so many broken promises.

That night, I promised him I wouldn’t tear up in front of his coworkers and clients during his real estate company’s event. The evening was a great opportunity for Penn to wine and dine very wealthy individuals who were in search of large properties. The smoother things went that night, the better chance Penn had at building his connections with his clients. He didn’t want to bring me along, but his boss insisted on spouses attending.

I promised Penn I wouldn't bring up our past, either. I wasn't intending to break my promises at dinner that night. I took my anxiety medication. I did my breathing exercises. I only closed my eyes when we went through the intersections on the car ride to the event. When we were on the freeway, I was fine. Normal, even—well, my kind of normal.

My promises were intact.

Everything was perfect, as perfect as it could've been, given my issues, and then Marybeth—the beautiful, stunning Marybeth—leaned in toward me during our meal. There were five couples at our table, which included Penn's work colleague, Marybeth. The others were potential clients of Penn's that were worth more money than I could've ever imagine.

I wished I could've been more like Marybeth. She was perfect. The perfect mom, the perfect wife, the perfect realtor. She smelled like Chanel No. 5, and her neck dripped in diamonds. Her pearly white smile made others grin with their lips sealed tight because they knew they couldn't match the level of wow that Marybeth's smile delivered. She was everything I wasn't and everything I'd dreamed of becoming.

There used to be a time in my life when I loved myself so much that I never envied another woman's life.

What happened to me? When did my strengths escape my body?

Perfect Marybeth touched my wrist lightly and smiled with both her lips and her hazel-colored eyes. "Intriguing tattoo, Kennedy. What does it stand for?"

Right at that moment, the promise I'd made to Penn dissolved. First, it was a crack in the corners of my promise, and then all the pieces shattered.

"It's…my…" I breathed in a sharply breath as I turned to see Penn staring at me so intensely. I saw it in his blue stare—the disappointment, because he knew the signs of my faults. He knew when I was slipping, slipping, slipping away. My body trembled, my voice cracked, and every breath of air felt labored. "It's…well…"

I looked down at the tattoo upon my skin: a daisy with a backward D in the middle of the flower.

"My… It's…" I swallowed the tight breath sitting in my throat and shut my eyes. Tears were waiting to break free, and I hated that I was about to let them fall. "It's for my parents and my…" I opened my eyes and looked toward Penn, whose eyes were screaming *Don't*,

but I couldn't start and not finish the conversation. "Our daughter. The backward D is for our daughter."

Her lips parted as realization settled into her mind. She sat back in her seat with a look of guilt gathering in her eyes. Of course she knew about the accident. Everyone knew about the accident; they just preferred to tiptoe around the topic instead of facing it head-on. Death made people uncomfortable, and I couldn't blame them for not wanting to talk about it. It was such an odd topic to tackle.

I traced the backward D on my skin as the tears began rolling down my face. "My daughter's name was—" I wanted to tell her. I needed to keep talking about them to keep them alive to me. It was the small comfort I needed, but sometimes the words came out a little too wobbly.

"Kennedy." A hand landed on my wrist, covering the tattoo. I looked up to see Penn staring my way, shaking his head lightly as he squeezed my wrist a little too tight. "Maybe you should go clean up your face, take a minute to yourself."

Which translated to: *You're embarrassing me again—pull yourself together.*

He didn't feel sorry for me anymore. After over a year, why should he have? He had been able to heal from our tragedy. I should've been able to do the same, yet, for some reason, I wasn't better.

All I wanted to do was be better.

I wiped the tears from my eyes just to have more fall rapidly. "Yes. Of course. Sorry, I just…" I pushed my chair away from the table and excused myself. "I'm so sorry," I murmured.

Marybeth's eyes were filled with guilt. Her hand pressed against her chest as I turned to walk away, and I heard her whisper an apology to Penn.

"No, no, you did nothing wrong, Marybeth," Penn said, sounding apologetic as he comforted his co-worker instead of his own wife. "She just gets that way. You did nothing wrong. She's too emotional for her own good. She needs to learn to pull herself together better. Really, at her age…"

Too emotional.

I headed to the bathroom to clean myself up. As I looked in the mirror, I was stunned by the reflection staring back at me. When had I lost it? When had I lost my color and my light? Had the bags beneath my eyes always been so heavy? How much weight had I

lost to make my cheeks look so hollow?

When the bathroom door was pushed open, a woman walked in —Laura, the wife of one of Penn's colleagues.

Laura was an older woman, probably in her late fifties. She was always so kind to me, even though I oftentimes came off as awkward and uncomfortable in most situations. Over the past year, Penn had made it seem as if I were more of a burden at his work gatherings than an asset. He'd tell me so many times that I'd be better off staying at home.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" Laura asked with the most sincere expression on her face. Her dark brown hair had waves of natural gray coming through, and when she smiled, you felt it.

I chuckled a little to myself and wiped my eyes dry the best I could. "Yes, I'm sorry. I'm just too emotion—"

"You're not too emotional," she cut in, walking my way with a paper towel in her hand. "You aren't overreacting. I lost a child when I was younger—a miscarriage, but still a child—and it almost destroyed me. My saving grace was my husband. He was my rock when I crumbled. Now, I don't mean to pry, but I couldn't help but see how Penn was treating you out there. Sweetheart, don't take offense to what I'm about to say, but that's not the way a husband should treat his wife. You should never be belittled when you are at rock bottom. He should lift you up, not kick you back down."

My lips parted to respond, but I didn't know how.

Laura patted the falling tears from my eyes and gave me a small smile. "Again, it's none of my business, and Jonathon would kill me if he knew I got involved in other people's affairs, but…you deserve healing, and you should be allowed to talk about your daughter without being shamed. Know your worth. Then charge more."

I swallowed hard as she gave me a hug I hadn't even known my soul needed. My body melted against Laura's, and she held me up as I cried into her arms.

"It's okay, sweetheart. You're okay. Don't bottle it up. Let yourself feel."

After I finished falling apart in her arms, she let me go and gave me a smile. "By the way, I've read all of your novels. Your words are something to be treasured. I cannot wait for your future books."

I'd been publishing novels for the past five years, yet after the accident, I hadn't written a word. My agent told me to take my time, and the words would come back to me, but lately I was

beginning to think that wasn't true. I lost my muse, therefore my words disappeared, too.

The car ride home was silent, my back turned to Penn as I kept my eyes closed the whole way back. When we entered the house, Penn finally unleashed his pent-up anger.

"You promised you wouldn't do that," he said with a sigh, brushing his hands through his gelled-back locks of hair. "You swore you wouldn't have another fucking episode in public again! I mean, geez, Kennedy! Don't you get tired of looking like a damn psychopath?" His words beat into me.

I expected them from him because those words always came after one of my meltdowns. When they had first happened, he'd understood because he was grieving, too. But as the months passed, his understanding approach had turned bitter. He was exhausted by me, and I couldn't blame him.

I was exhausted by me, too. I just wished he could see I was trying my best. I was trying my best to be normal, to be me again.

I was trying.

I stared at him, uncertain about what to say because apologies felt so empty after so many failed attempts at trying to be my old self once more.

He took off his sports jacket and tossed it over the living room chair before unbuttoning his cuffs. "I wish you would've never gotten that stupid-ass tattoo. It's a fucked-up reminder of a fucked-up time, Kennedy. I don't get why you'd want that reminder staring you in the eyes every single day."

His words were harsh, yet again, I didn't blame him. I just stayed silent, staring down at the ink on my wrist. He didn't understand it, but I needed that daily reminder. I needed to feel my baby girl on my skin. I needed to feel as if she was still with me.

"Do you have anything to say?" he asked, unbuckling his pants. He tilted his head toward me as if he were a disappointed parent as opposed to a concerned, loving spouse. "Anything?"

"I'm…" I swallowed hard and looked down to the ground. "I'm so-sor—"

"You're sorry," he spat out, shaking his head. "Of course you are. You're always sorry. Your whole life is an apology."

He was angry, and I understood why, but I didn't get his aggression. It could've been the whiskey drinks sitting heavily in his gut from dinner. My husband was much more forward and shorter

with me when he'd been drinking. His fuse was burning to an end.

"You know what…? I can't." He sighed, shoving his hands through his hair before plopping down on the couch in front of me. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one up. "I can't do this."

"I-I know." I swallowed hard and shut my eyes. "I know I can be a lot sometimes…"

"Sometimes? Kennedy. This is all the time. You haven't been normal for a long time, and it's exhausting. It's hard. You haven't worked on any new novels in months. You hardly leave the house. Just getting you into a car is a chore. It's suffocating me. You're suffocating me. I can't keep doing this. I can't…" He shook his head. "I should've never done this in the first place."

"Done what?"

"Married you. We should've never gotten married. My parents told me it was a terrible idea, but I was young and stupid, and look where that got me. They warned me that you were just trying to trap me, but I disagreed."

I shook my head as I looked his way. "Penn—"

"But here I am—trapped. I should've listened. I should've run back then and not been an idiot."

"You…you're upset. I know I messed up today, but—"

"Stop talking. Don't you get it, Kennedy? I only married you because you got knocked up, and now I don't even have a daughter to show for it because of you," he spat out, raking a hand through his hair.

My chest felt as if it were collapsing.

His words stung even though we'd been so distant that his comments shouldn't have hurt me anymore. We hadn't been close in a while, minus meaningless sex and attending his work parties. I couldn't recall the last time we laughed. My heartbeats were hardly ever crafted for him. Still, the venom on his tongue wreaked havoc on my mind, leaking into my brain cells and poisoning my self-worth—not that there was much left of it.

He kept going. He kept digging. He kept destroying me with his words. "My father was right—you should've had an abortion. It would've saved us all a lot of time."

My heart…

Its beats…

They all came to a halt.

Crashing…

I was crashing down.

My knees buckled beneath me and the cold hard wooden floor caught my body. I began to sob into my hands, and there was no one around to comfort me. Penn was tired of it all, tired of me, tired of this—my panic attacks, my breakdowns, my hardships.

I knew it right then and there.

Our relationship, our marriage, our promises were over.

He tilted his head in my direction and seemed unfazed by it all. "Maybe you should go somewhere else tonight. For a while, actually. A few weeks, a few months… Go figure something out because you staying here isn't going to work out anymore."

"Where will I go?" I choked out, confusion hitting me fast.

"I don't know, Kennedy. Go to your sister or something."

Yoana…

I hadn't seen her in over a year. What would it look like having me show up after all this time without a word? What would she say? Why would she give me comfort after all this time, after I'd gone MIA? All she received from me were text messages here and there telling her I was okay even though I wasn't. She owed me nothing but still kept giving me everything. She'd write me long messages telling me about her life, keeping me up to date on any and everything. All I could do was send her a few emojis every now and again because while her life was moving forward, mine was standing still.

The last message she'd sent was about her honeymoon, which she was finally about to take after two years of marriage. The one before that was requesting that I come to visit. Before that? She left a long voice message about how she and Nathan flipped a house and were about to put it on the market. Since the two of them had gotten married, they'd both been so into the idea of flipping houses. The fact that they were able to work together and still be so happy reminded me so much of our parents. Mama and Daddy had been the same exact way.

Penn and me? We couldn't have been more opposite. When I told him I wanted to be an author, he laughed at me, telling me I didn't have the right education to do so. When I received my first book deal, he said it was luck. When my royalty checks came in, he told me not to spend them because more probably wouldn't come.

Penn walked to his office and came back with a package of paperwork. "I was going to give these to you before the accident,

but I held off. Just sign on the dotted line and leave them in the front hall when you go."

Then he exited the room, leaving me sitting there with my too emotional self as he placed a nail in the coffin of our marriage. Divorce papers.

I signed them all as my chest ached.

I packed my things into three suitcases, taking only the important things, only the items that meant the world to me. Then I called myself a taxi and began the forty-five-minute ride to see a sister who didn't have a clue I'd be showing up on her front porch to beg her to let me in.

After the driver dropped me off at her home in the town of Rival, Kentucky, I dragged my suitcases to the front porch.

A sigh of relief washed through me when I saw their car parked in the driveway.

I hurried and began knocking on the door. It was past ten at night, and there was a good chance Yoana was already sleeping. She'd never been a night owl, always an early riser.

"Who is that?" a deep voice questioned—Nathan's, of course.

I spoke up a little. "Yoana, it's me," I choked out, sobs sitting heavily in my throat. "It's Kennedy. I, well, I need…" I swallowed down the fear in my chest and shut my eyes. "I need you."

The door flew open and there she was, standing there in her pajamas, looking at me with the most concerned stare ever.

My older sister looked like a goddess even now when she'd been awakened in the middle of the night. Gosh, I needed her. I needed her so, so much it made my stomach physically ache to see her eyes staring back at me…the eyes that looked so much like Mama's.

"Are you okay?" she asked, and those three words cracked the shell of my hurts wide open. The sincerity in her voice hurt me more than I could say—the care, the gentleness, the love. I'd spent the past year lying to my sister about my well-being, out of stupidity and struggling with internal demons, and still, without a moment of hesitation, she was asking me if I was okay.

My lips parted, but no words came out. Tears began flooding my eyes, and I covered my face as I sobbed uncontrollably into the palms of my hands. "I'm sorry, Yoana," I cried, shaking my head in embarrassment and pain. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

She didn't seem to need my apologies. She didn't hammer me with questions about my situation. She didn't scold me for pushing

her away. Instead, she stepped forward, wrapped her arms around me, and held me so tightly in her grip.

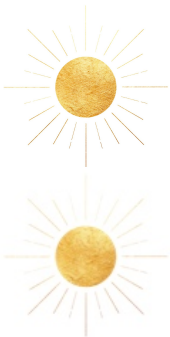
“You’re okay, Kennedy. It’s okay. I got you. I got you.”

She held on tight. For the first time in the past year, I begun to breathe again, and my sister didn’t let me go.

As she held me, she asked me a very, very important question—probably the most important one I’d heard in a very long time. “Wine?”

“Yes.” I laughed, and I was taken aback by how genuine it sounded. “Wine.”

2



Kennedy

New beginnings should come with a warning label.

Warning: fresh starts won't stop old memories from flooding your brain, resulting in panic attacks, social discomfort, and waves of every emotion possible stemming from depression, crashing into gratitude, and crackling into sparks of anger. No feelings are left behind.

It had been three days of me sleeping in my sister's guest room, and Penn hadn't reached out to me once. I tried my best not to reveal the confusing thoughts playing through my mind. I didn't want my heaviness to weigh too heavily on my sister and Nathan—they didn't deserve that. They deserved the me who was only thankful, not the sad girl I'd been for the past year. That was the problem with Penn—he saw my sadness and proved that side of me wasn't worth loving. So I was working harder and harder not to let that side of me slip out. I didn't want to push people away with my grief anymore.

I wanted people to stay.

Fake it till you make it, Kennedy.

It's a proven fact that if you smile more, people will think you are happy. That's basic science. I'd been smiling so much for the past few days since I'd arrived at Yoana's that my cheeks were sore.

Sometimes, I'd excuse myself to the bathroom just to let the smile fade for a moment before I pasted it back on my lips.

I hadn't been called out on my fake smiles so far, which meant those smiles deserved an Oscar.

"Okay, don't peek!" Yoana warned as she guided me down the streets of a small town called Havenbarrow. The town was only fifteen minutes from her home, and she said it was the cutest small town ever. For the past few days, all she talked about was the cuteness of the small town.

I couldn't have peeked even if I wanted to thanks to the bandana covering my eyes. We'd been walking for a while, me stumbling every few minutes while Yoana tried her best to keep me from dying.

"Is the blindfold really needed?" I asked, a bit confused by all my sister's antics while guiding me. The moment we parked her car in town, Yoana ordered me to close my eyes. Then, she took me on an adventure.

"Yes! Now hush and keep going. We're almost there. Wait! Stop! Car!" she screeched, yanking me backward.

"What the hell!" I hollered, causing Yoana to burst out laughing.

"Just kidding. We're nowhere near the street. I just thought it would be funny."

"Oh, how I've missed your sense of humor." My tone was joking, but I really had missed her sense of humor. I'd missed pretty much everything about being around my sister, and since I'd come to her for help, she'd been nothing but a saint to me.

"Only one more left turn," she told me with her hands on my shoulders—then she whipped me to the right. "I meant right, right! Okay, a few steps forward…two steps back."

"Are we doing the dance routine for Paula Abdul's 'Opposites Attract'? Because if so, I need to change my shoes," I told her.

"Shush, woman. We're here. Just move a little to the left." I scooted. "A little more." I shuffled my feet some more. "Okay, good, good. Now a liiiittle to the right."

"Yoana!" I hollered.

She laughed, and the sound alone made me chuckle. "Okay, okay, sorry. I just want the surprise to be perfect, that's all."

"Okay, so tell me what to do. Can I see the surprise now? Not that you had to get me anything because you've already done more than enough by letting me sleep in your guest room. Plus, the fact

that you—”

“Kennedy.”

“Yes?”

“Shut up.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, thank you. Now on the count of three, I’m going to take off your blindfold to show you the most exciting thing ever. One… two…three!” She ripped the blindfold off and revealed that we were standing in front of a house. A very cute house that was freshly painted with a picket fence surrounding the yard where wild foliage grew rampant. On the front steps of the house was Nathan—Yoana’s husband—with two bottles of champagne in his hands and the biggest goofy grin I’d ever seen on his face.

I glanced over at my sister, confused as sin. “What exactly is happening?”

“Surprise!” she squeaked. “It’s your new home!”

“My new…” I whipped around to face Yoana as my jaw dropped. “My new what?” I exclaimed, bafflement hitting me at a new speed.

“Your new home. As you know, Nathan and I have recently gotten into flipping houses, and this was our latest flip in the cutest small town known to mankind. We were about to put it on the market but decided to hold off so you’ll have somewhere to stay that’s just yours.” She was talking as though everything she was saying wasn’t complete insanity as she walked forward toward the front porch. “The yard hasn’t been done yet, but the landscapers will come start on it in a few days, and there is little to no furniture. Okay, there’s nothing inside, but I ordered a few pieces I think you might like and they are arriving over the next few days. I picked out a washer and dryer that will be delivered, and for now, there’s a top-of-the-line, old-school blue refrigerator in the kitchen that you have courtesy of Nathan and me from our garage. I also had Nathan run to the store and get you some essentials—a nice queen-size blow-up bed, some dining items, a cheap kitchen table, all the bathroom basics, and—”

“Why would you do this?” I choked out, completely stunned and confused by all this undeserved kindness Yoana was showing me. “This is insane.” I didn’t deserve this. I couldn’t stay in a house they were about to put on the market. I couldn’t take so much from my sister when I had given her so little over the past year.

If anything, I'd taken the most important things from her life already.

"Why would I do this?" she asked, surprised by my question. She placed her hands on my shoulders and narrowed her eyes. "Kennedy…you're my sister. I'd do anything for you."

When I thought of earth angels, my older sister was always the first one to come to mind. Yoana was a saint beyond saints, a doer of good. Hearts like hers were so few and far between. She was beautiful both inside and out even though most people noticed her outer beauty first. Yoana McKenzie Lost was the spitting image of our mother. She had Mama's tight black curls, espresso skin, doe eyes, and the deep dimple that carved out her left cheek. Whenever I missed my mother, I was lucky enough to be able to look into my sister's eyes.

Me, on the other hand—I was the perfect blend of both my parents, the embodiment of their love story. I'd received Mama's smile and Cupid's bow. I had Daddy's crooked, slender nose and his chipmunk cheeks. Mama and I had matching birthmarks on our shoulder blades and the same dimple in our chins. My loose honey-colored curls were a mixture of both of my parents' genetics.

And my eyes? They belonged to my father. I had Daddy's golden-kissed eyes that had slivers of browns and greens dancing within their irises. Whenever I missed him, I looked into my own mirror. Some people would look at me and call me biracial but I simply called myself Aaron and Renee's daughter.

My sister and I were the living, breathing proof of our parents' epic story—their greatest love of all. Even though Daddy wasn't Yoana's biological father, there was no doubt that he was her dad. When my mother was lost and all alone with a two-year-old, Daddy swept both girls off their feet, and he loved Yoana as if she was his own the moment he laid eyes on her.

It takes a special kind of man to love a child that isn't his by blood. There was never a split second when my father treated Yoana any differently than he treated me. Sometimes, when I was younger, I even felt as if he loved her a little bit more than he loved me. He didn't do it on purpose, of course, and the older I grew, the more I understood. Yoana had a missing link in her life's novel, and Daddy made sure she knew her storybook was still filled with love even though she'd never know her biological father.

She was his daughter—maybe not by blood, but most definitely

by heart. Their hearts beat in sync, and sometimes, I could've sworn Yoana had Daddy's smile.

Not a day passed when I didn't miss my parents, but luckily, I had my sister to hold me up now. I wished I had realized that sooner. Instead, I had pushed her away because I figured she blamed me for the accident.

It was because of Yoana that I felt as if the overcast sky that'd been following me around for the past year was finally clearing up to sunny days and calmer nights. For the rest of my life, I'd owe her for the unconditional love she bestowed on me.

They showed me around the house, leaving me shocked by how beautiful it was, especially based on the before photographs they'd shown me. When it was almost time for them to go catch their flight for the honeymoon, Yoana made sure to give me a to-do list for while they were gone.

"Now, repeat back what I've told you," she ordered.

"Meditate morning and night, no matter what, even if only for five minutes to breathe. Yes, Mother," I sarcastically groaned in annoyance, but truthfully, I was so thankful for Yoana's love.

She had so many of Mama's heartbeats in her soul. Being around her felt like being wrapped in the warmest of weighted blankets, instant comfort.

"And those woods behind the house—don't be afraid to walk through them. I know they aren't your property exactly, but I doubt the man who owns them will care or notice. When Nathan and I worked on the property, we got lost back there, and it reminded me so much of when Mama and Daddy would take us hiking as kids. Remember how often we'd get lost?"

I snickered. "Oh yeah, and when Mama would get nervous about the sky getting darker, Daddy would say, 'You can't be lost if you're surrounded by nature. Nature is our home.'" I smiled at the memory before my lips began to turn down.

"I miss them," Yoana confessed.

"Me too." More than words. I had no doubt I'd find myself wandering those woods for some meditation sessions.

When we were younger, my parents would have my sister and me ground our energy every morning and evening. Daddy taught us yoga and Mama taught us breathing techniques. Those lessons truly helped shape my life, but when things went wrong, meditation was the first thing that disappeared from my daily routine. Funny how

people lose their main principals and beliefs when their world is turned upside down.

The other tasks on my to-do list from Yoana?

- Find one thing to make me smile each day.
- Journal in order to slowly dive back into writing.
- Get daily sunlight when the weather allows.
- Explore Havenbarrow.

Yoana nudged me in the side. “Now that all that is handled, do you want to go out to grab something for dinner?”

“I’m actually getting a little tired. Besides, don’t you have a plane to Costa Rica to catch?”

A slack expression washed over her face as she glanced at her watch. “Oh, right. That.”

“Yes, that.” I chuckled. “Only the first leg of the most epic honeymoon of all honeymoons.”

She gave me puppy dog eyes. “Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?”

“Uh, no. Trust me, I’m not above being a third wheel to the movies with the two of you, but tagging along to travel the world would be crossing the line.”

“Fine. I just don’t know what I’m going to do without you for so long. I feel like I just got you back.” She paused and nibbled on her bottom lip as her eyes grew wet and dull. “I don’t want to lose you again.”

“Don’t worry. When you get back, I’ll be even more of myself. You won’t lose me again, ever.” I sniffled a little, watching Yoana get emotional. “Don’t you start crying because you know I’m a sympathetic sobbing queen. Just hug me and get lost, will you?”

She pulled me into a hug. “I’ll call you every day, okay? I don’t care about the time difference. We’ll check in on every social media outlet, and if you need me, no matter what, Kennedy, I’m there for you.”

“I know. Thank you. Now go!” I ordered, waving the happy couple toward the door. I leaned in, kissed Yoana’s cheek, and gave Nathan a tight hug. “You take care of her or you die, okay?”

“Aye, aye. captain. Listen, the town here has some great places to eat and check out. Don’t be afraid to reach out if anyone gives you a hard time, either. I know how these small-town people can

get—rude. You're my sister now, and I'm not afraid of kicking someone's ass from overseas."

I laughed. "Go, you guys. I love you, be safe, and do like Mama and Daddy always said on their adventures—don't be afraid of the unknown."

"Same goes for you, sister. Don't be afraid of the unknown," Yoana echoed.

Nathan said goodbye then walked outside to give Yoana and me a moment alone. My chest ached at the thought of her leaving me, but I did my best to hide that pain.

"What Penn did to you was cruel, and if I could, I'd absolutely cut off his dick, but that chapter of your life is over. Remember what Mama and Daddy said to do when someone makes you feel weak?"

I nodded as tears started to form in my eyes. "When someone makes you feel weak, do something to make yourself feel strong."

"Exactly, and that's what you're doing now. You're rediscovering yourself. You're starting over, and anyone who has the guts to start over is strong. You are so strong. Mama and Daddy would be so proud of you. I know I am."

Leave it to Yoana to make me cry. "Geez, just get out of here, will you? You're going to leave me sobbing like a fool alone in a small town."

"Okay, I love you. I'll call once we make it to the airport."

We said yet another goodbye because saying goodbye to each other was always an extremely long process. As my sister closed the front door, I took a deep breath and allowed the tears to fall down my cheeks.

Leaning my back against the wooden door, I closed my eyes and felt the rush of loneliness slamming into my chest. It turned out, it didn't matter how big or small one's home was, it didn't matter how warm or cold the house had been, and it didn't matter how many things were packed inside the walls—when loneliness showed up, it still felt extremely sad.

Just then, my cell phone dinged.

Yoana: I forgot to tell you! I left you a present. I placed it out onto the driveway for a little comfort.

I swallowed hard and pulled myself together as I headed out to find the surprise. The moment I stepped outside, more tears welled up in my eyes.

There it was, parked right in front of me, a gift from the past that was meant to bring me a slice of comfort: Mama and Daddy's convertible. That beat-up vehicle represented my two favorite people, people I'd lost. It was a dull yellow color with drawings all over it. Mama and Daddy would have us draw our favorite moments on the car throughout our childhood, creating lasting memories we were able to look back on throughout the years.

As I walked around the car, I took in every memory inscribed upon it. Birthday celebrations. Art shows. Family vacations. I couldn't help but feel a smile curve my lips. It was an instant reminder of who I truly was, down to my core.

I remembered driving down the freeway with my family, listening to Lauryn Hill as our hair blew in the wind with no fears and loads of happiness. Yoana sat beside me in the car, and her laughter was infectious. She would fall into a giggling fit as she and I blew bubbles in the back seat of the car. You couldn't be unhappy with those three people in your life and that kind of joy.

I hopped into the driver's seat and inhaled deeply as a particular scent washed over me.

Mama.

I glanced over at the passenger seat, where a basket was filled with goodies and a letter. Mama's favorite perfume was there, and I knew that was what I was smelling. Yoana must've sprayed the car seats with the fragrance.

Lilacs and honey.

Along with the perfume was a bottle of whiskey and a jar of coffee beans.

I opened the letter and read the words.

Kennedy,

I hate that I had to leave you so quickly after we reconnected, but I figured you could use a piece of your family while you rediscover yourself. Therefore, I've left you with a jar of Mama's favorite coffee beans for the mornings and a bottle of Daddy's favorite whiskey for your nights.

Love you, sis. Call me if you need me. I'm just one flight away.

And try not to overthink everything. You're right on track, even on the days when it doesn't feel that way.

-Yoana

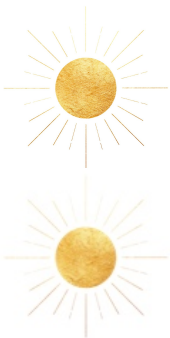
As I stared up toward the stars painting Havenbarrow's atmosphere, I opened up the bottle of whiskey and spent the rest of

the night making wishes on the stars for better tomorrows. I asked Mama and Daddy to send me a sign that no matter what, everything would be okay. I asked for guidance, for prayer, and for miracles.

I could've really used a miracle in my life.

When morning came, I had a strong feeling I'd be able to finally feel the sun after so many days of darkness.

3



Kennedy

“Watch your step, Louise. Don’t crush those bushes,” a voice whispered as I yawned in the back seat of the convertible I’d slept in the night before. I was pulled away from my rest when I heard rustling in the yard.

My heart leaped in my chest as I pushed myself up to a sitting position.

“Oh hush, Kate. Me stepping on these bushes would be doing them a favor—trust me,” the other woman whispered-shouted back. They were tiptoeing around the property, sneaking peeks into the windows as they both held plastic containers in their hands.

“Do you think it’s a big family?” Louise asked. “Lord knows the last thing we need is more kids running around the neighborhood.”

“I don’t know but based on the lack of furniture in the house, they might be struggling.”

I cocked an eyebrow at the snooping ladies, who hadn’t noticed me sitting feet away from them.

“I hope they hire someone to take care of this pigpen of a yard. I don’t need the property value going down because of the newcomer. The last family who stayed here already did enough damage,” Louise huffed in disgust.

“Can I help you, ladies?” I cut in, watching the nosy women jump right out of their Louboutin heels at the sound of my voice. They caught their balance and luckily kept the containers in their grips as they rotated to see me sitting in my car.

“Oh my gosh, sweetheart, you shouldn’t sneak up on people like that,” said the one in the yellow sundress—Kate, I gathered—while holding one hand against her chest. “You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

I almost rolled my eyes at the irony of it all, but instead I just gave her my best Southern smile as I climbed out of the car and walked their way. “Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Louise’s eyes danced over my vibrant outfit then locked with mine. “Well, yes, you should be more careful.”

“I’ll do better next time. So how can I help you?”

Kate stepped forward with her perfect blond curls dangling in her face. “Oh, yes. We’re your neighbors! We saw you were moving in last night and thought we’d stop by to say hello. I’m Kate, and this is Louise.”

“No relation,” they said in unison, and then they giggled. “Just kidding, we’re twins!”

Because of course they were.

“I live two houses down from you to the left, and Kate lives two houses down to the right,” Louise said. “You’re right smack dab in the middle of the twin sandwich.”

Lucky me.

“Well, I’m Kennedy. It’s nice to meet you.”

They kept their big smiles on their faces as they glanced at my parents’ convertible. Then their glares danced across my appearance and back to the car.

“I must say, that’s quite the unique-looking car,” Louise mused, her tone dripping with judgment. “Do you drive it around, or is it more of a…statement piece?”

“It belonged to my parents. It holds a bit of family history on it. I haven’t started it up to take it out on the road yet, but I might give it a go at some point.” *Maybe tomorrow. Maybe in a year. Who knows…*

The women grimaced. “Interesting,” they said, once again, in unison.

“Are those for me?” I asked, trying my best to shift the conversation and get it moving along. If I knew anything about

small towns from all the books I read, I knew these twins were the perfect recipe for trouble.

"Oh, yes. We each made you a pie. Best strawberry pie and apple pie you'll ever come across in your life. We stayed up late last night cooking them when we saw you moving in."

"You shouldn't have," I said.

"Sweetheart, of course we did. We are, after all, your new neighbors. We take our Southern hospitality seriously in these parts," Kate commented, still frowning at my property.

Louise cleared her throat. "Speaking of landscaping"—*Were we speaking of landscaping?*—"who's handling yours? I can get you a few names of individuals who do great work."

"Well, thanks, but we have that all lined up. I'm not the actual owner of the place."

"Oh my." Kate whimpered as her fingers landed on her lips. "Are you a squatter? You don't actually live here? I mean, I guess that explains the car, but that's quite illegal."

"We should inform Sheriff Reid," the other sternly stated.

Are these women serious right now? Am I being Punk'd? Is Ashton Kutcher hiding in the Louboutin-crushed bushes?

"No, no. What I mean is I am renting the place from my sister and brother-in-law for the next few months before they sell it. The landscapers are supposed to be coming through over the next few days to get started."

"Oh, thank heavens!" Louise exclaimed. "I couldn't for the life of me let this wildness go any further. We are already dealing with Crazy Joy Jones next door with her unkempt property. If I had the chance, I'd buy that house right out from under her, the weirdo."

She said weirdo like it was a bad thing. I'd personally found myself more attracted to the weirdos of the world. They seemed far less judgmental.

I looked next door at the property that was the saving grace in keeping me from being direct neighbors with Louise. The house was exactly as she'd described it—rather unkempt—but still, it was somehow perfect. Wildflowers bloomed as if they'd been planted to be free. There was no true rhyme or reason to the way they grew, but it looked like a piece of artwork.

The ladies would've probably hated me if I told them I loved the property. The freedom of it all sang to the caged part of my soul. I wanted to move the way those flowers danced.

Free. Uncaged. Like the wind.

"Her husband died years ago, and Crazy Joy hasn't left her house since then," Louise explained. "You ever see *Hey Arnold!*, that cartoon from the nineties? There was that one character, Stoop Kid, who was too afraid to leave his stoop? Well, that's Crazy Joy in a nutshell. She's too afraid to leave her front yard since her husband died."

"If he hadn't left Joy money and their house wasn't paid off, I'm sure she would be homeless. I'm not one to gossip, Lord help me, but that woman is a nutjob," Kate added in. "Rumor has it she believes aliens are going to take over the world someday soon. All those letters she writes each morning on her front porch are letters to Area 51. Total wacko."

The more they talked, the more I wanted to meet this neighbor.

"Whatever you do with your landscaping, don't make the same mistakes Joy made with her property," Kate warned. "Especially with that," she urged, pointing over at Joy's yard.

I arched an eyebrow. "With what?"

Her eyes widened with confusion. "Don't you see it??"

"See…what?"

"Those blue flowers!" she whisper-shouted, gesturing like a crazed woman. "She planted blue flowers front and center!"

I waited a few moments for Kate to continue her thought, but her lips shut as if that was the conclusion.

Louise must've caught on to my confusion. "Blue flowers! It's just not natural."

Oh my gosh. If Yoana and Nathan had known who my neighbors were, I was almost certain they'd have reconsidered having me stay in that home.

I smiled at the two crazy ladies. "I will keep that in mind. Now, I better get back to—"

"I hate to pry, sweetheart, but were you sleeping in your car when we arrived? Don't you have beds in the house?" Louise asked.

Don't you have manners?

This woman was out to make up the most absurd stories about anything and everything. I had a history of seeing the best in people—which, yes, came with its struggles—but Louise and her sister obviously had a tendency to see the worst.

I bit my tongue. The last thing I wanted to do was make enemies out of the neighbors. These two women seemed the type to raise

hell if they felt they had a reason to do so.

"I like sleeping under the stars sometimes. Plus, my furniture isn't being delivered until next week. Thanks again for the pies, ladies. It was nice meeting you."

Their stares moved across me once more, and then they smiled creepily at the same time.

Stephen King would've had a field day with this pair.

"We'll be seeing you around, I'm sure. Welcome to Havenbarrow. If you don't want to be seen around town driving that, err, family heirloom, I'm pretty sure you can get yourself the Cuber app," Louise said with that evil smile.

"You mean Uber?" I asked.

Louise chuckled and waved a hand in my direction. "No, honey, I mean the Cuber app. We don't have none of that Uber or Lyft stuff in town, but Connor Roe created his own app called Cuber. He's seventeen, but the boy is swift. Plus, his car is more…stable than yours appears."

Oh, if only she knew how much more her comment made me want to drive Mama and Daddy's car around town. I'd dealt with enough bullies in my past. I had little room left in my heart for their nasty tones.

Still, I hadn't driven since the accident. The truth was, I didn't know if I'd be able to do so any time soon.

"Don't make yourself a stranger while you're here. Remember, if you need any information on anything and anyone in this town, you can always ask us, sweetheart. We're pretty well informed on everything that goes on around here. Kate's husband is the mayor, after all, so it's our job to be informed. If you want, you can mosey down to our houses for landscaping inspiration. Remember—two to the left and two to the right and you'll find us!" Louise said before the both of them hurried off.

Note to self: Don't turn left or right when leaving the house.

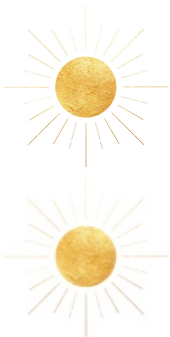
By midday, I had a dozen more neighbors show up with desserts in tow, all claiming they were looking to introduce themselves. If I hadn't been overwhelmed by my life before moving to Havenbarrow, I would've been by the time I received my fourth loaf of gluten-free, nut-free, taste-free banana bread.

From the number of questions and nosy invasions I'd experienced, I was certain the women of the town would have plenty to say about me at their next book club meeting.

To get a break from the madness, I tossed on a pair of tennis shoes and grabbed my journal. I couldn't take any more human contact for a while. I needed to ground myself. I needed to go back to the basics.

Just me, my journal, and the woods.

4



Kennedy

Something about nature always made me feel at peace, something about the way the trees grew of their own accord and leaned in toward the sun for kisses of light. Something about the way their branches waved and danced with the rhythm of the wind while their roots stayed solidly planted in place spoke to me, the way the fresh air smelled crisp with a mixture of florals and greens.

The way the birds sang…I loved the songs they sang at the start of each spring, revealing the way they were awakening to a new beginning. I loved how the birds moved through the spaces of nature as if they belonged no matter where they were, how they moved freely without restraints. That was all I'd wanted in life, to move freely as the birds while still having my roots placed solidly in the ground. It sounded ridiculous—the idea of both flight and steadiness—but my dream was to belong in a place yet still be free.

I'd been wandering through the forest behind my house for the past forty-five minutes in search of a place to unwind and write down my wishes, my dreams, and my hopes.

I hadn't left any type of roadmap back to my house and hoped I'd be able to find my way on my own. Worst-case scenario? I'd sleep beneath the trees. It wouldn't be the first time, and I doubted

it would be the last.

When I pushed my way through a few branches, I was surprised to come upon an open field, one free of any trees and filled with flowers of all kinds. The flower that stood out the most was the one that took my breath away.

Daisies.

Hundreds upon hundreds of vibrant yellow daisies seemed to have been placed there on purpose. My eyes flashed with tears as I tried my best to control my breathing pattern. In the middle of the field was a white bench, and I couldn't help but find myself walking down the manmade path toward it. It was beautiful. The way the sun peeked through onto the flowers and made them glow was breathtaking.

I couldn't think of a better place to sit, breathe, and write.

So I did exactly that.

I began scribbling in the notebook, losing myself as I poured out any and every feeling that came to mind. I didn't have a clue how much time passed as I moved the pen across the paper, and I didn't care. I was more concerned with getting my truths—no matter how messy they were—down on paper.

When the afternoon sky began to darken, the solar lampposts interspersed throughout the daisies began to light up the space, making everything feel that much more special.

"What the hell are you doing here?" a voice barked my way, making me leap from the bench. My pen and notebook went flying from my grip, landing amongst the flowers. I turned to see a man standing behind me and a wave of nerves crashed into me.

"Oh, hello. I'm Ke—"

"I didn't ask who you were," he cut in, his voice low and stern. "I asked what the hell you're doing here."

He was a well-built man. His shoulders were broad, his biceps were impressive, and his smile was—well, nonexistent. And his eyes? I got lost in those dark eyes that matched the sky at midnight. I knew it was ridiculous, but I could've sworn I'd seen those eyes before. Maybe in a dream, or perhaps in a fantasy, but either way, I felt a pull toward the harsh stranger. I knew those dark irises that drank me in, and the way he tilted his head toward me, completely perplexed, made me feel as if he perhaps knew me, too.

But from when?

From where?

“Do I know—” I started, but I was quickly cut off by his harshness.

“Are you deaf?” he scolded.

Maybe I didn’t know him. I’d have remembered knowing someone as rude as him and would have reminded myself to stay far, far away. “No. No, not at all.” I hurried to collect my journal and pen that had gone flying a few moments ago. As I stepped forward, flustered, I tripped over my own feet and stumbled, trying to catch my footing.

“Careful!” he called out, his voice a mixture of annoyance and worry—not worry for me, obviously. He seemed more concerned about the daisies.

Thankfully, I didn’t fall. I did my best to tiptoe through the flowers as I grabbed my things. “Sorry. I was wandering through the woods when I—”

“Trespassing.”

“What?”

“You were trespassing. This land is private property.”

I snickered a little as I hugged the book to my chest. “Yes, I heard, but—”

“So you knew?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“There are no buts. You heard and disobeyed the law. Remove yourself from my property before I have to get law enforcement involved.”

I huffed, stunned by his words. “Is it really that serious? I was just trying to get some fresh air and explore and—”

“Trespassing,” he cut in—*again*.

“Stop cutting me off!” My face was growing warm from his attitude as anger began bubbling up inside me.

“I will once you’re not on my property.”

The man with the most intense, sad-looking eyes was beginning to get under my skin. How did he think it was okay to be so rude to a person he didn’t even know? He was being so blunt, harsh, and cold.

I decided to ironically call him Mr. Personality, seeing how his was ever so charming.

“You don’t have to be so impolite,” I grumbled, shaking my head in disbelief. “I wasn’t harming anyone or anything by being out here. The idea that people can own nature is a completely

ridiculous concept anyway. These trees were here before you were even born, will be here long after you're gone, and still you are trying to claim them as yours. That's insane to me."

"I suppose you're fine with strangers wandering into your house unwelcome then."

"That's not the same."

"Wasn't the land the house was built on there before you were born? Won't it be there after the house comes down and you're gone? But I guess people trespassing in your space is different because it's yours and not mine."

"Your sarcasm isn't appreciated," I snapped, speaking firmly despite my nervousness.

I began to step forward to exit the field of flowers, and accidentally crushed a few daisies. He leaped toward me.

"Careful!" he shouted.

He bent down to the ground and began trying to repair the damage I'd caused. The grimace on his face turned into a full-blown frown as the daisies lay limp in his grip. His hands were so big it looked as if he were a giant playing with miniature florals. His lips moved slightly as he muttered something under his breath, but I couldn't discern what he was saying.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you," I stated, my heart still lodged in my throat from my nerves.

"Probably because I wasn't speaking to you."

"Right. Sorry. Also, I'm sorry about any damage I caused to your flowers."

He mumbled beneath his breath—*again*. You know how there was Cesar Millan, the dog whisperer? Well, currently, I was dealing with Mr. Personality, the human whisperer—not because he had a profound way of understanding humans, but because all he did was freaking whisper.

"If there's anything I can do—"

"Just go," he stated, his voice low and controlled.

"No offense, but you have a terrible attitude."

"No offense, but I don't give two shits what you think about me."

"Asshole," I muttered.

"So you've heard."

"Heard what?"

"About my role in this town's fucked-up story," he grumbled.

“I’m the town asshole. Just living up to the part.”

“I can see you take it seriously.”

“I’m a professional.”

“Hopefully, you’re just a small part in this town’s story.”

“No small parts in a small town, just cliché small minds. I’m sure you’ll fit right in. Now, if you could do me the pleasure of getting the hell off my property, that would be grand.”

Wow.

Okay, Mr. Personality.

He took his role to heart, a total method actor—cool. I could get behind someone who took their acting career seriously, no big deal. And boy, was he good. He deserved an award for his performance. I believed every arrogant comment he dished out.

If Louise, Kate, and Mr. Personality were the highlights of this town, I was in for a treat.

He didn’t look back up at me. Those dark, mysterious eyes didn’t lock with mine again. He kept his stare on the daisies with such a scowl on his face one would have thought I’d stepped on his loved one and crushed them to death.

I muttered another apology with no response then began my trek back to the house—well, I tried to find my way back. When I ended up making a circle in the woods, I found myself back at the field of daisies. Mr. Personality was sitting in the middle of the field on the white painted bench, and he released a weighted sigh when he saw me.

“Go straight this way to my house. It will take you to Merry Road. Hopefully, you can figure out where you live when you get to a main road.”

“Right. Of course. Thank you.”

He didn’t say another word.

As I walked around the block to find my way back to my property, I couldn’t help but laugh at the fact that Mr. Personality lived on a street called Merry. He was far from merry. Scrooge Avenue seemed much more fitting.

5

Jax

People were the worst.

Unfortunately, my day job required me to be in close contact with humans on a regular basis. I was the town's one and only plumber, so needless to say, I spent a lot of time dealing with Havenbarrow's shit. There were so many days I wished I would've become a writer, or a sculptor—or literally anything that involved as little human contact as possible. *Oh, you need someone to sit on Mars for fifty years? No fucking problem, boss. Sign me up.*

Hell, being a vet would've been better than this. At least then I would've been able to interact with cute pets while dealing with their dumbass owners who thought it was okay to feed their dogs wine because LOL YOLO.

Needless to say, I wasn't a people person. I found them too people-y for my liking. I'd crossed paths with a lot of different types of individuals in my life and I had learned quickly that most of them weren't for me. Therefore, finding a woman trespassing in my woods wasn't the most exciting thing for me to experience yesterday afternoon. Even if she was beautiful, she was still, after all, human. Her beauty wasn't enough to make me not care that she was on my property. I wanted from her the same thing I wanted from pretty much everyone else in town—to be left alone.

“What in the hell is stuck in there?” I grumbled as I glanced down the clogged-up sink of the Jeffersons’ master bathroom.

Marie Jefferson was an older lady with kind eyes. She was in her early sixties and always wore her pearls around her neck, along with the most expensive, vibrant clothing known to mankind. She was always wearing designer clothes, and if it wasn’t designer, it was still expensive as hell. Most people in Havenbarrow received hefty paychecks or came from a family with hefty paychecks, and Marie was no different. She simply didn’t have the same snotty attitude as a lot of the town did.

On the scale of people I hated, she was one of the few and far between who I could tolerate, which was good considering her husband, Eddie, was my therapist and had been since I was thirteen years old.

“Oh, well, you know…” Marie shrugged her shoulders and twirled her finger in her dyed rose-gold hair. “Last night, Eddie and I got a little wild, and well…” She cleared her throat, and her cheeks turned a bright shade of red. “Jax, it’s a little embarrassing. Eddie told me not to tell you the truth, but I’m a terrible liar.”

Her stare moved past me and landed on Connor, my assistant, who’d recently finished his junior year of high school. He was my one and only employee for one simple reason—no one else in town had enough nerve to work with me. Connor was different, though. He was the town’s hustler through and through. If there was a way to make a profit, Connor was all over it. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was a millionaire before he turned twenty-one. The wheels in his head were always turning with ideas on how to make more money for himself.

I’d been working with him for almost a year now, which was a lot longer than any of my other employees had lasted. Everyone before him either left crying or calling me an asshole. Some cried and called me an asshole at the same time.

Connor was different. He didn’t take any of my aggressive, short comments personally. He was determined to show up for his paycheck and have a good time doing it, too. Even when I was in a shitty mood, Connor acted as if we were the best of friends.

It actually worked pretty well in my favor. We were the perfect odd couple. It was as if Oscar the Grouch had a plumbing business with Big Bird. When I came off as a grump to customers, Connor used his charm to win them over. He walked away with more tips

than I did on the regular because people liked him. I couldn't blame them.

Sad to say it, but over time, the little shit had grown on me, too.

I brushed my arm across my forehead. "Now, don't be embarrassed, Marie. Either you can tell us now, or I'll take apart the pipes. We'll find out what's in there regardless, but if you tell me now, I can avoid doing extra work in case it doesn't need as much as I might think it does."

"Oh, heavens." She blushed and clutched her pearls in her slender fingers. "Okay, well, I'll just spit it out. There are anal beads down there. Not big ones or anything! Just a very small string of them."

Connor instantly burst out laughing. I shot him a stern look to tell him to shut the hell up as my body flinched at the idea of what Marie had just told me. The idea of sweet, little Marie using anal beads brought about a level of discomfort I wasn't ready to face. What kind of freaky shit was my therapist into? Disturbing didn't even begin to cover what I was feeling.

Hell, now I was clutching my own damn pearls.

"We only used them once while Eddie and I were…um, well…" She blushed more and leaned in toward me. "You see, I was on my hands and knees on the sink counter." She paused and gestured around. "Don't worry, I bleached everything before you came over. There's no cu—"

"Oookay, you know what, Marie? I think we got it from here. How about you go ahead and tend to whatever else you need to get done around the house? I'll be done in here in no time."

I glanced over my shoulder to see Connor standing there with his arms crossed and the reddest face in the history of time. His cheeks were puffed out like Alvin the damn chipmunk, and I knew if I poked him in the side, he'd explode.

When Marie was out of sight, Connor released his laughter, hunching over and gripping his stomach as he howled in a fight of giggles.

"Oh my gosh, that's the nastiest shit I've ever heard! She's like a hundred years old!" he exclaimed.

"She's in her sixties, not one hundred, and you'd be lucky to be her age and still have a sex life."

He shivered at the thought. "That's disgusting. I don't want my wrinkled cock sliding into someone at that age."

“Language, Connor.”

“I’m just saying that’s fucking gross.”

“*Language*, Connor.”

He groaned. “Sorry, Jax.”

“Just hand me a wrench, will you?” I rolled up my sleeves and maneuvered beneath the sink to get started.

“Hey, Jax—knock, knock,” Connor said, holding the wrench out toward me. I swore, this guy cracked more bad jokes than a Midwestern dad.

“Who’s there?”

“Marie’s anal beads.”

For fuck’s sake. “Marie’s anal beads who?”

He snickered before bursting out laughing again. “No, that’s it. That’s the joke. The joke is you’re about to touch Marie’s anal beads, and if that’s not comedy, I don’t know what is.”

He kept snickering the whole time I worked, and I didn’t expect anything less from the goofy kid.

After the anal beads had been successfully removed from the sink pipe, I scrubbed my hands aggressively then shut off the faucet. “Go toss the stuff into the truck. I’ll meet you there.”

“Aye, aye, captain.”

He hurried away, and as I headed out of the bathroom, I found Eddie walking into the house with a briefcase in his hands. He spent his mornings in the park, reading the newspaper on his days off.

Eddie was in his sixties, too, and the wrinkles on his face told the stories of his past. His smile lines were deep, and all of his lines contained levels of depth.

He nodded my way with a small grin. “I see you’re still alive after missing two weeks of therapy appointments,” he commented with a smirk.

“Just working.”

He nodded in understanding as he set his briefcase on the ground. He raked his hand through his gray hair. “And Amanda? How is she? How are you two doing?”

“We aren’t. We broke up a few weeks ago.”

“Hmph.” Eddie stare said a lot more than his words ever would.

I sighed. “Okay, out with it.”

“Out with what?”

“Your thoughts on the subject of Amanda and me.”

“Thoughts?” he murmured, brushing his thumb across his thick

mustache. “I have no thoughts at all on the subject.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Really.” He paused for a moment, still studying me with those therapist eyes of his. The fact that we weren’t sitting in his office didn’t mean he wouldn’t utilize his skills on me. A part of me was suspicious that he’d had Marie place the anal beads down the drain just to get me to come over after missing some appointments.

I wouldn’t have put it past Eddie.

“Why?” he questioned with his narrowed eyes. “Should I have thoughts on the subject? Do you have thoughts on the subject?”

There it was.

His comments seemed so nonchalant, but I knew he was setting me up to dig deeper into my psyche about why things hadn’t worked out between Amanda and me. He was therapist-ing me.

“Do you want me to lie down on your couch and tell you my thoughts?” I joked.

Eddie smirked a little. “My couch is always open.”

“Yeah, well, not today. Plus, we have rules. In-office sessions only, remember? Besides, I have more jobs to get to with Connor, so forgive me for not wanting to dive into the details of my breakup.”

“Hmm.” *Oh hell.* I knew the tone of that hmm. No good ever came from that type of hmm when it left Eddie’s lips. He gestured toward the couch. “Are you sure we can’t explore a bit? Even for five minutes or so?”

I snickered. “Nice try, doc, but I have to run.”

“What exactly is it you are running from?” he said with his hands clasped together and his head tilted to the side.

“Currently? Anal beads.”

He tossed his hands into the air. “For goodness’ sake, Marie, you couldn’t stop yourself from telling Jax about what happened to the bathroom drain?” he hollered toward the other room.

“The beads were your idea, sweetheart! Don’t blame me for being unable to lie,” she hollered back. “My truthfulness was what made you fall in love with me all those years ago.”

“Yes, well, things change.” He groaned, shaking his head.

I pushed my tongue into my cheek. “Are you sure *you* don’t want to lie down on the couch and tell me your current thoughts and feelings?”

He shot daggers at me with his eyes, making him less Dr. Jefferson and more Human Eddie. “I thought you were leaving.”

I smirked. “On my way out.”

“Stop by the office when you get a chance. We’ll have a real meeting.”

“Sounds good.”

“Oh, and Jax?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m really sorry to hear the news about your father.”

I stayed quiet for a few seconds. I didn’t even bother asking how he’d heard about it, because I knew people in our small town were all news reporters without the credentials. It was a town of gossipers who didn’t really give a damn about my father or me.

If anything, they were running around singing songs of joy about him almost being dead. Soon enough, I’d walk down the streets and hear the townspeople’s praises: *Ding dong, the dick is dead. Which ol’ dick? The dickiest dick!*

My father wasn’t loved by me, and he was even less loved by the town’s inhabitants. If I had to count the number of times he’d been referred to as the town’s Mr. Potter from *It’s A Wonderful Life*, I would’ve been exhausted by the high number. I couldn’t even argue with the assessment.

My father wasn’t a good man, and now he was in a nursing home, struggling after his third stroke had left him partly paralyzed with vascular dementia. He no longer knew who he was, and I was no longer able to take care of him. He’d recently moved into the nursing home where he’d be able to get the care he needed.

Before my father was placed there, I’d spent the previous twelve years aiding him with his health issues—which were a lot. He never took care of himself, which made it even harder for me to do so. During all that time, he was quick to beat me, too, to remind me that I was under his control. My older brother, Derek, left the day he turned eighteen and never looked back. Mom had Derek from a previous marriage, but throughout my whole life, Derek referred to my father as his—up until the day our mother passed away and Dad turned to us as his punching bags.

Now, Dad had been moved out of the home I grew up in and placed in the care of others. Even though I hated him, the house still felt a little colder at night. Funny how one could miss the demons they used to play with once they had to go away.

Eddie had a field day when I revealed that truth.

I nodded once, trying not to show any feelings about my father’s

condition. The truth was, I'd skipped our therapy appointments because I wasn't ready to talk. I didn't know what to say.

A frown landed hard on Eddie's lips. He used to be better at holding his frowns in during our therapy sessions, but the older we grew and the more we became like family, Eddie couldn't hide his worry about me.

"If you need to talk…" he started.

"Your couch is always open—yeah, Eddie, I know."

I headed outside to meet Connor at the truck, but to my surprise, I found him standing at the fence, talking with Eddie and Marie's newest neighbor—the trespasser.

He was holding one of his business cards out toward her and talking way too much—like always. "So, yeah, I am the founder, owner, and CEO of Cuber Incorporated, and as a new member you get your first ride for free. But, as you appear to be a diamond in this town of coals, I'll let you have two rides free. Just download the app and enter the code 'diamond'." He paused and scrunched up his nose. "Okay, don't enter that code yet because I have to update the app before that will work, but after like sixteen hours, I'll be free to give you a ride." He wiggled his eyebrows in a suggestive way.

"Connor," I called out, making him snap his head to me. "Let's go."

He held up a finger. "One sec, partner, I'm conducting some business. Speaking of businesses, I have more than just Cuber going on. I am a partner at Kilter and Roe Plumbing and—"

"You're not a partner, you're an employee, and currently even that is hanging by a thread."

Connor laughed me off and waved a dismissive hand my way. "Don't listen to him, he's just a grumpy old man before one in the afternoon. Takes him a while to wake up and be a decent human like the rest of us," he joked.

Trespasser smiled and chuckled a bit, looking my way. "I could see that being true," she said.

I grimaced, unimpressed by where this conversation was leading. "Connor, truck. Now."

"All right, partner—"

"Again, not my partner."

He rolled his eyes. "Some people and their resistance to titles, am I right?" he said, grinning, and Trespasser laughed once more.

Screw her laugh for being beautiful. “But, anyway, let me get going before Grumpy McGrump pops a blood vessel. Remember, if you need a ride, you got Connor on your side. Also if you have any plumbing issues, don’t be afraid to hit me up at the second number on this card.” He handed her another business card then winked. “I’ll be more than happy to snake your pipes.”

Oh good Lord. The innuendos coming out of these kid’s mouth were painful.

“Connor, get your ass in the truck,” I barked.

“Grumpy McGrump indeed.” Trespasser smirked, which annoyed me even more because her smirk was kind of beautiful, too. I walked back to the truck and hopped into the driver’s seat.

A few moments later, Connor joined me, buckled his seat belt, and then rubbed his hands together. “Couldn’t miss the opportunity to get new clients. You understand, boss.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Oh, so now I’m your boss?”

“Listen, Jax, you gotta understand—women respect men who have their own businesses. It makes me look more professional when I say I’m your partner.”

“Or it makes you look like a liar.”

“Potato, potahto.”

“Let me see this business card you’ve been handing out for us.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled it out.

I glanced at it and shook my head instantly. “Kilter and Roe Plumbing: Same Shit, Different Toilet. *That’s* your tagline?” I groaned.

“It was either that or We Pump Your Dump,” he explained. “I feel like the one I chose rolls off the tongue better. Now, since I scored some new clientele and assisted with the removal of anal beads, I think it’s a perfect time to stop by the café to grab lunch before our next job,” he suggested, wiggling his eyebrows.

“We just ate breakfast before stopping at the Jeffersons’.”

“Yeah, like two hours ago. I know you’re old and probably already hit your prime and all you have to look forward to in the future is anal beads, but I am a growing boy, Jax! I need all the carbohydrates I can take in.”

I turned the key in the ignition. “We’ll eat lunch during our break at the office. I already packed food for us.”

Connor grimaced in disgust. “Please don’t make me eat another peanut butter and jelly sandwich and your disgusting protein shake.

I'm so sick of that."

"It's packed with protein, and it will help you build muscle."

"You know what else would help me? A number nine from McDonald's."

I smirked. "You can spend your paycheck on that stuff during your own time, but when working with me, you get the sandwich and a protein shake."

"With grass in it."

"It's not grass. It's kale."

"I don't mean to take away your man card, Jax, but adding kale to your protein shakes makes you look a lot like those chicks who wear Ugg boots and are addicted to Starbucks and Target."

"Are you calling me a basic bitch?"

He parted his lips to reply but paused, arching an eyebrow. "Are you going to tell me to watch my language if I call you a basic bitch?"

"Yes."

"Well then stop being a basic bitch and eating kale. Next thing I know, you'll be Instagramming avocado toast while drinking kombucha."

"What's kombucha?"

"Oh, thank God." Connor sighed and wiped his hand across his forehead. "You still have your balls."

"Don't say balls," I ordered, pointing a stern finger his way. "And don't say basic bitch."

He sat back in his seat and placed his hands behind his head, propping his shoes up on my dashboard before I quickly knocked them down.

"Okay, I won't say basic bitch. Anyway, can we take a minute to talk about the hotness that is the Jefferson's new neighbor?" he asked.

"No."

"Come on, Jax. You had to have noticed. She's smokin' hot! And did you see her eyes? She has the most stunning eyes I've ever seen. They were like…caramel. Did you see, Jax? Did you see her eyes?"

"Yes, Connor." I saw her eyes, and he was right—they were damn beautiful, but that had nothing to do with me, and it definitely wasn't any of my business…which was why it confused me that the thought of her eyes weighed heavily on my mind.

* * *

The day of plumbing tasks continued, and Connor didn't stop talking the whole time. I swore that kid talked about nothing at all twenty-four hours a day. I'd become pretty good at tuning him out because half the shit that came out of his mouth was just teenage gibberish. Maybe that was why I liked him, though—because he was nothing like me. He was warm, inviting—and a complete idiot, yes, but still, I liked having the kid around. Of course I'd never tell him that because he'd never let me live it down.

As we pulled up to his house at the end of the evening, Connor's color drained a little as he glanced toward his home. The bright, chatty kid lost all of his light in an instant as he looked into the house and saw his mother walking around inside.

It was only the two of them, and his mother was currently fighting cancer, which was extremely hard on them both. I knew Connor worked as hard as he did because he wanted to be able to take care of his mother. He had a heart of gold, and she was lucky to have him.

I lowered my head as my hands stayed gripped on the steering wheel. "If you guys need anything," I offered, feeling awful for the poor kid. I wished I could take away his struggles.

He shook his head. "Nah. We're good. We're getting through it. Tonight, I'm going to watch a Disney movie with her to try to up her spirits. She loves that Disney stuff." He always tried to act like the cancer wasn't getting to him, but I knew better than to believe that.

It wasn't fair that Connor was being forced to grow up faster than he deserved.

"Text me if you need anything," I said.

"Will do. I'll see you tomorrow. Hopefully the day involves more anal beads," he joked, but the paleness to his face was still there as he tried to hide his hurting with humor.

"Doubtful."

"Night, Jax." He hopped out of the truck and dashed toward his front steps. I waited until I was certain he'd made it into his house.

Instead of heading home like I wanted to, I went to the one place I wished I didn't need to go to see the one person I wished I knew how to get over. I went straight to the nursing home to see

my father.

I knew he would probably be sleeping when I arrived. He'd been sleeping a majority of the days lately as his body fought to either preserve his life or move him closer to death—I wasn't certain.

All I knew was that ever since he ended up in the nursing home, I was there every night, sitting at his bedside while he was in his deep slumber.

I noticed a bike parked outside the nursing home, and I knew it belonged to Amanda, one of Dad's caregivers who just so happened to be my ex-girlfriend.

I walked into the center and noticed her sitting at the reception desk, reading a novel. She was always reading some book about knights in shining armor saving the day.

I figured it was because of those books that I'd never lived up to what she wanted me to be. Even when I tried to be fully into our relationship, I always knew deep down that something was missing. Passion? A deeper connection?

Who knew.

Maybe I was too fucked up from my past traumas to know how to love someone right. All I really knew was after two years of dating and no engagement, she grew tired of it all. When she mentioned us having a baby and skipping over the marriage step, I knew it was time to cut the cord.

"Hey," I said, nodding in her direction. She hadn't even noticed me walk in. When her eyes were locked on those pages, she was distant from the rest of the world, fully immersed in the words on the page unless a patient needed her help.

She shut the book and gave me a half-smile. "Hey."

"How's he's doing?"

"You know, same ole, same ole." She stood from her chair and hugged her book to her chest. Her brown hair was pulled up into a messy ponytail, and she looked exhausted. I had a feeling her job wasn't the easiest to perform.

It was clear that Dad didn't have much time left, and to be honest, I wasn't certain how to feel about it all. My father wasn't a good man. He was cruel to anyone and everyone he came into contact with.

A few glances around my house demonstrated what my father had been like toward me when I was growing up. He'd put enough holes in the walls from when his drunken rage emerged through his

fists. When those fists hadn't connected with walls, there was a good chance they'd collided with my face. I couldn't count on both hands the number of times he'd beat me in every single room of that house for the most mundane things.

If the washer didn't finish before the evening news—beating.

If strangers were found wandering on our property—beating.

If he heard me snoring too loud—beating.

If he missed my mother—fucking beating.

I always tried to piece together when my father had become the monster he was. He had been cruel and violent before Mom passed away, but Dad lost his mind when she died. I didn't blame my brother for leaving town. I should've done the same thing except I could never build up enough courage to leave Dad on his own.

Maybe a part of me felt the need to take care of him.

Maybe a part of me felt I deserved the beatings.

Either way, I stayed.

I should've filled in the holes in the walls, but a part of me didn't want to forget the damage that my father had done.

Amanda folded her arms, and her stare grew gentle. "How are you holding up?" she asked.

"You know, same ole, same ole," I muttered, giving her the same words she'd delivered my way. I pulled out the paperback from inside my jacket and held it in the air. "Can I go back?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Okay. Thanks, Amanda."

Lightning lit up the sky outside, and within seconds, there was a deluge of rain falling.

"Crap," she muttered, rolling her shoulders back. "It's really coming down out there, and I rode my bike to work."

"I'll give you a lift home when I'm done here if you want."

I saw the spark of hope in her eyes as I said the words, and I wished I could've been the kind of dick who didn't notice a woman's emotions. It had to be easier than seeing every feeling that shifted their features.

"Yeah, that would be great," she said, trying to hold in her smile.

Don't smile for me, Amanda. I'm not worth it.

I headed to Dad's room, and when I walked in, he was sleeping, which was good. If he hadn't been asleep, I would've considered turning around and walking away. Sitting on his deathbed, he still

had the ability to be full-blown cruel—even when he didn't recognize me as his own son. When he was resting, though, I could look at him as more human than a monster.

I pulled up a chair beside his bed and began reading *War and Peace*—his favorite novel—to him. I'd been reading him a few chapters each evening, even if he couldn't hear me. That novel was one of the only things he and I had in common. Outside of liking the same book, I was the complete opposite of the fragile man who lay across from me.

I read for about forty-five minutes before shutting the book and rising to my feet. Dad looked so broken down and tired. Sometimes I'd count his breaths to make sure they were all being taken fully.

Other times, I'd lay my hand against his chest to feel his heartbeats.

My cold heart didn't know how to deal with what was happening to the man I'd always known to be hard and rough. Seeing him so broken down was harder than I could've ever imagined.

After I finished my visit, I headed toward the reception desk where Amanda was already waiting. "Ready?" I asked.

She nodded as she gathered her things.

We walked out to my truck, and she was quick to change my radio from the rock station to her pop music. "Thanks for the ride. I didn't know it was supposed to rain," she explained, running her hands down her thighs.

"No problem."

"Did you see the invitation for Alex and Morgan's wedding?" she asked. "I mean, it came to our old place, but Morgan said she'd send you another one since we aren't each other's plus-ones anymore. Unless…" She bit her bottom lip, and fuck, all I wanted was a cold beer and silence. "Unless you want to still go together."

I raked my hand through my hair. "I think we both know why that's not a good idea."

"It could be a good idea if we tried it, though. I mean, really—how about we give that exes-with-benefits thing a go? I think I'm healed enough from the breakup." She said it in a playful tone, but I knew she was serious.

"Amanda…you just drunk-dialed me sobbing last weekend."

"That was the alcohol's fault. It makes me a mess." She laughed, but I knew it was a nervous laugh. I felt pretty shitty about the

breakup, not because it wasn't right for us—because it was—but because she was having such a hard time with it all.

We pulled up in front of her apartment building, and I put the truck into park. "Amanda, come on. We've talked about this. It's just not going to work between us. You already know I think you're a great girl and—"

"Please don't belittle me with your empty compliments," she muttered. "It doesn't make it hurt any less."

I lowered my head. "If having you work for my dad is making this split too hard, I can look into having him transferred—"

"I can do my job," she snapped. "I don't need you questioning if I can handle my work because of my feelings for you. Besides, I was kidding about being exes-with-benefits. Just drop it. I'm sure you'll be dating soon enough anyway, and it'll be as though I never existed."

"I'm not seeing anyone." If only she knew how wrong she was about her theory. Dating was so far off my radar. I figured if a girl like Amanda couldn't make me a family man, maybe I wasn't meant to be one. She was a good person with a kind heart.

There was just some unknown part of me that didn't see myself falling in love with her and raising her children, and I wasn't going to be the asshole who strung her along. I was going to be the asshole who broke her heart.

Talk about a lose-lose situation.

"Did you ever love me?" she asked, and *fuck* did that question suck. She knew the answer. I didn't know why she was doing this to herself.

I glanced over at her and witnessed her eyes filling with emotion. "I'm sorry, Amanda."

"Maybe you're just like your father," she stated, and those words made my skin crawl. "Maybe you're just so messed up in the brain that you can't love another person—or even let them love you."

My jaw tightened as I tried to shake off what she'd said.

Maybe you're just like your father.

That was a low blow, and Amanda knew it. The only thing in life I never wanted to be was like my father.

"Good night, Amanda."

"Really? That's it? You're not going to try to argue that?"

Of course I wasn't. She was setting up a trap I didn't want to mess with at the moment. She was trying to force some kind of

reaction out of me, but I had nothing to give her. I'd keep my irritation to myself, because the truth was, I was nothing like my father. I never allowed my anger to overtake me.

She hopped out of the truck without a word and hurried into the apartment building.

A sigh rolled through me as I turned the radio back to the rock station.

When I pulled up to my family's property—over one hundred acres of land that had been pretty much unkempt for years—I released a sigh of relief. I could've worked on the landscaping, but whenever I offered, Dad made sure to tell me not to touch shit until he was dead and gone. He said once he died, it would all be mine, and I already knew what I wanted to do with it. Mom had dreams way back when about what she wanted the lot to look like. I was going to do my best to make her vision become a reality.

I didn't believe in angels, but that didn't mean there wasn't a possibility they were real. If they were, I knew my mother would be an angel, and if she was watching over me, I hoped making her dream come to life would make her proud.

Just as I did every week, I called my brother that night to update him on Dad's condition.

Derek lived up in Chicago and had been saying—for the past fourteen years—he was going to get back to visit. It turned out I was always the one to make the yearly trip up north to see him.

As we talked that night, I could tell he wasn't upset by the news of Dad's deteriorating health. "Well, maybe it's time for you to step back completely. Let's be honest, Jax, you've done more for that man than he deserves. You don't have to keep being a parent to a guy who didn't even parent you correctly."

I sat down in Dad's favorite recliner and sighed. "Easier said than done."

"I'm serious, Jax. You've done enough."

I didn't respond because after the accident with Mom all those years ago, I didn't feel as if I'd ever do enough to make up for what had gone down.

"I have a lot of karma to clean up, Der. The least I can do is look after him in his final days."

He sighed through the phone, and I envisioned him pushing his hands through wavy hair that matched mine. "If this is about the accident—"

“It’s not,” I lied. Of course it was a lie.

Everything about my life was a result of the accident from years before. Every choice I’d made to push people away was because of the mistakes of my past.

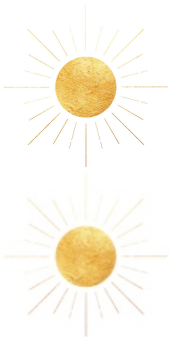
“Jax.” I could hear Derek’s pain for me through the phone. “What happened was not your fault. You can’t hold that shit on your soul forever. Believe me when I say this…it wasn’t your fucking fault.”

He told me that every time we talked.

I never believed him.

After we ended the call, I headed to bed and allowed the darkness of the night to rock me to sleep again.

6



Kennedy

If you gave a Kennedy a muffin, you'll probably pry to learn some facts.

That seemed to be the motto of the people in Havenbarrow.

I'd awakened to more neighborly folks showing up with goodies to welcome me to town. The number of times they handed me food while trying to peer into my home was unnerving. What was even more concerning was how I'd say something to one visitor, and by the time the next one came through, they were already caught up on my whole life story.

It turned out news spread through Havenbarrow like wildfire, and when the stories spread, they somehow became a little worse than when they started. It was as if we were playing telephone in elementary school. Currently, I was an unemployed single female, squatting at my sister's property without her knowledge.

I'd never truly considered myself a city girl until that moment right there. Back where I came from, no one cared who you were, and the only gift they were offering was a hand pressed to their horn if you waited two seconds too long after a red light switched to green.

The one saving grace for the small town other than my not-so-

nosy neighbors the Jeffersons?

My other lovely neighbor, Joy Jones.

Joy was quite the character to take in. That morning when the sun came up, she walked outside on her front porch and sat down in her rocking chair with a smile on her face and a large cup of coffee in hand. A few of my nosy visitors told me it was a daily routine for her.

Her silvery hair was tossed up in a messy bun held together with two knitting needles, and her thick-framed vibrant orange glasses sat on top of her head. She wore a brightly colored bow in her hair that matched her dress for the day, and she always greeted everyone who passed by her house, even when they didn't speak back to her.

When no one was passing by, she was busy talking to herself—or, more accurately, talking to her husband, who was no longer alive. She also scribbled away on paper, writing letters as if her life depended on the ink bleeding onto the ruled pages.

It was heartbreaking to watch, yet more concerning was how the townspeople ignored her when she did slip out of her delusions. When she greeted the passersby, she was so kind, but the feeling wasn't mutual. It was as if they were afraid to offer her a wave, a good morning, good evening, or good night on their walks around the block.

What bothered me even more was how quickly people ridiculed her. If they did speak her way, they mocked her, calling her Crazy Joy, the woman who never left her front porch. Rumor had it she hadn't stepped foot off of that wraparound wooden porch since the day her husband died. Sometimes, teenagers would mock her, flipping her off as they laughed with each other in groups.

"Hi, Crazy Joy. Cook anyone up in your house lately?" they harass before I scolded them and hurried them away.

"Have good days, sweethearts," Joy said as she waved their way, not even bothered in the slightest. Still, Joy kept greeting everyone who passed, and her smile never faltered. It was as if she was above being bothered by an individual's judgments and cruelty, as if the others' opinions and thoughts didn't affect her joy.

She truly lived up to her name. I wished I could be more like her—less affected by the world around me—but my feelings were so much like the wind, moving wherever they were blown. It was a flaw of mine, one my husband had made sure to tell me about all

the time, too.

"*Pull yourself together, Kennedy. You can't react and take everything I say so personally*," he'd always tell me. "*Your emotions are going to ruin everything good that we have.*"

I'd been trying my best to delete his words from my brain, but it was easier said than done. When someone makes you feel so little, your mind locks onto your flaws.

"I'm sorry they were so cruel to you," I said to Joy.

She looked my way with the biggest smile on her face and shook her head. "Who was cruel, sweetheart?"

I grinned back.

Never mind.

I went back to reading my book on my own front porch as the beams of sunlight warmed me from head to toe. It was funny thinking about how Joy hadn't left her house for years. To others, it probably seemed insane, but I understood. I hadn't driven a car in over a year for my own personal reasons, and Joy hadn't ventured out for hers.

I wasn't saying it made sense, but I understood. Sometimes, no matter how much they want to fight it, a person becomes so invested in their fears that they do everything in their power to keep them from coming to life. I didn't know what Joy's fears were or what was keeping her from leaving her home; all I knew was I got it.

Life is hard. We have to do whatever it takes to keep ourselves and our minds comfortable. For me, that meant not driving. For Joy, that meant staying home.

I wondered how she managed, though. I wondered how she kept living without stepping foot outside her home. She didn't seem to have any children or even a caregiver who came to aid her from what I could tell.

Later that morning, my questions were answered as a blue pickup pulled up in front of the house. Needless to say, my jaw dropped to the ground when I saw Mr. Personality step out of the vehicle. He walked his way straight toward Joy's front porch, his arms filled with grocery bags.

He proceeded to greet Joy, and she stood from the rocking chair as he set the bags down. Then he hugged her.

He hugged her!

I wouldn't think someone as grumpy as Mr. Personality had the

ability to hug someone. The two of them walked inside to put the groceries away, leaving me completely baffled and unable to return to my reading. It took a lot to break me away from a book—and by 'a lot', I mean *a lot*. My house could've been on fire, or aliens could've beamed me up, and I would've still been trying to get in that one last page. When my own love story was broken, I turned to stories to heal the cracks of my broken heartbeats. When my world fell apart, the books still believed in happily-ever-afters. Those books saved me on the days I felt my soul falling victim to the hardest of storms.

Yet Mr. Personality pulled me away from the words on the page. He made me curious about him walking into Joy's house. Watching him chat away with her had my mind racing. A few minutes later, when the two of them walked back outside each with a glass in their hands—one with wine, the other with some dark liquor I assumed was whiskey—I couldn't stop myself from glancing over at them. Joy kept talking, and Mr. Personality kept responding. Even though I couldn't hear what they were saying, Joy looked beyond smitten with whatever was being said to her, which forced my own heart to skip a few beats.

Well, I'll be damned.

The town asshole made me swoon.

I looked away before he could notice me staring at him as if he'd just saved a kitten from a tree. As I turned back to my novel, my heartbeats didn't slow, and I silently wished I could be a fly on Joy's porch railing to see what the two of them were talking about.

When I heard a deep manly chuckle fall from Mr. Personality's lips, my head flipped around so quick to see him tossing his head back in amusement.

Whoa.

He had the ability to be amused.

Who would've ever thought?

The two talked for a little while longer, and then when it came time for Mr. Personality to leave, he stood and gave Joy another hug.

"I'll see you tomorrow for breakfast," he told her. "I'll make you pancakes."

"Okay, sweetheart. You call me once you make it home," Joy said.

"I'm right around the corner, Joy. I'll make it home safely."

“Call me once you’re home,” she said once more, more sternly this time.

He almost smirked as he leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “Will do, Joy.”

My heart?

Pitter-freaking-patter.

As Joy walked inside and Mr. Personality walked down her footpath back to his truck, my eyes followed him the whole time. He didn’t glance my way once, but his lips did part.

“If you’re going to be that nosy, you might as well pull up a chair on her front porch to skip over the eavesdropping next time,” he said to me, still not looking my way. “I shouldn’t be shocked, though, seeing how you have a way of trespassing, first on my land and then on my conversations.”

I sat up straighter in my chair. “I wasn’t trespassing.”

He opened his truck door. “Pull up a search engine online, search the word trespassing, realize you were wrong—then live with that fact for the rest of your life.” With that, he slammed his door shut, turned the key in his ignition, and pulled away from the curb without another word.

And my pitter-freaking-patters?

They came to a halt as my heart flipped him off.

So the asshole was still an asshole, even if he had drinks with sweet Joy.

That night, I did google the word trespassing.

Tres-pass

/ˈtrespəs,ˈtresˌpas/

Verb

Gerund or present participle: trespassing

1. Enter the owner’s land or property without permission.
2. Commit an offense against (a person or a set of rules)

The definition on Urban Dictionary was a little different than Merriam-Webster, though.

Tres-passing

1. When a woman is someone else’s property but two guys tag-team her.

(Tres)passing: Two men, one woman. (threesome)

Okay, okay. I had been trespassing on his property, but there was no threesome-type trespassing involved whatsoever. Plus, I wasn't trespassing on his conversation. I was eavesdropping. Totally not the same thing. I'd call that a win in my book.

7

Jax

Joy Jones was easily my favorite human in Havenbarrow, but most of the town stayed far away from her. Eddie's family and I were the exceptions. She was in her late eighties, and most of the day her mind lived in a time when the world was much different. Ever since her husband passed away over twenty years ago, Joy had become a true recluse.

Most people called her insane, but I called her brilliant. Little interaction with other human beings? Count me in.

When I was younger, I ran away from home once after my drunk father told me he was going to beat me until I went to sleep forever, and I ended up hiding in Mrs. Jones' back yard for a few days. When she found me, she didn't scold me or tell me to go home and get lost. Instead, she baked me cookies. She fed me dinner. She asked me about myself.

That was over fifteen years ago, and I'd been having morning coffee and evening dinner with her pretty much every day since then. To the rest of the world, she was Crazy Joy, but to me? She was my friend, one of the few.

"What do you think about my new neighbor?" Joy asked me one night after I came for our evening dinner session. "Eddie and Marie came over for lunch earlier, and they had so many nice things to

say about her."

"I think nothing of her," I said as we sat down at her dining room table, which was laden with enough food for a whole gospel choir. Joy had a way of cooking too much food all the time, and I knew it was because she was determined to send me home with leftovers each night. I swore, the woman probably thought I couldn't make a frozen pizza without burning it.

I never argued with her about the leftovers she sent with me. The truth was, I'd burned my fair share of frozen pizzas, so Joy's concern was warranted.

"I think she's so sweet. Beautiful, too," Joy commented, placing salad on her plate before passing the bowl to me.

"Oh?" I said, sounding disinterested even though I'd have been a damn fool not to notice how good-looking the woman was who'd moved in next door. Good-looking felt like an understatement. She was breathtaking. Her tight honey curls bounced every time she smiled, and when she smiled, damn…

That smile made even my cold heart want to feel slight warmth. She had long legs that went on for days, vibrant clothing, and short shorts that hugged her ass in all the right places. Then those eyes…

Those damn eyes. Why did they look so familiar to me, as if they were a key to a memory I hadn't been able to unlock? Those eyes smiled even more than her lips. When she was sad or spooked, her eyes frowned more than her lips, too. It was as if her irises were the pathway to her story, but I hadn't been able to dive deep into her language, hadn't cracked her code. I didn't know what story her stare was telling. I didn't understand the words lingering in her eyes.

Shit, I hadn't even tried to understand.

I didn't want to try.

"She seems like a good girl," Joy went on. "Nice personality, too. You know each morning she greets me with the biggest smile and asks if I need anything? She's a sweetie pie like that. The world needs more nice girls."

Why? So it could destroy them?

If I knew anything about nice people, it was that the rest of the world wouldn't stop itself from beating the kindness out of them. It was as if niceness was a disease and everyone was determined to pummel anyone who displayed its symptoms. I'd spent the past twenty-eight years having any positive light beaten out of my

system, and if I'd learned anything, it was that the world wasn't made for nice people. It was created to destroy them.

I stayed quiet as Joy kept going on about her. "You should talk to her more, get to know her."

I snickered a bit. "Not really into making friends, Joy." She knew this. It wasn't a secret. A warning sign of that should've been when my best guy mate was my fucking therapist and my best lady friend was almost ninety. "Besides, I have you." I always figured if you had a true friend, you were better off than most. And me? I had a handful of them—if I counted Connor. Based on statistics, I probably had one too many.

"Yes, well, one day I'll be gone, and you'll need a new one. You better start putting out feelers now. I ain't getting any younger, boy. Besides, I think she could use a friend, too. She lost somebody, just like the both of us."

My eyebrow arched. "She told you that?"

Joy shook her head. "Loss isn't something that needs to be said. It sits heavily within a person's eyes. People who have lost loved ones move a little differently. Her loss still feels fresh, as if she doesn't know how to move through each day. That's something I can understand. I think it's something you can understand, too, so consider getting to know her a little."

I narrowed my eyes. "You aren't trying to play matchmaker since I broke up with Amanda, are you?"

"No, no, not this time. Not a matchmaker—just a friend-maker. Contrary to your personal belief, everyone needs friends, Jaxson, even the black sheep in a small town like Havenbarrow."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"And by the way, I'm happy you broke up with that Amanda girl. She was too pushy," she said, waving a hand in dismissal. "Always wanting you to be someone you weren't, trying to change you into someone she wanted you to be—I didn't like that. Plus, she didn't like my lemon cake."

I laughed. "Which was exactly why I broke things off with her."

She reached across and patted my hand with her palm. "What a good man you are, Jax. Speaking about my neighbor," she said, switching the subject back to what she deemed important, "you know what I like best about her so far?"

"What's that?"

"The unique car parked in her driveway. It's so different and

fun! Oh, Jax, you have to see it when you leave. It's very neat."

Thankfully, Joy allowed the conversation to shift from my dating and friendship life when the newest episode of *The Bachelor* came on. Like always, I watched the insane show with her. Like always, I called who wasn't getting a rose at the end of the episode, and like always, Joy acted so surprised at who was going home. During the show, a few rumbles of thunder came rolling through, and I knew we were in for a powerful rainfall.

Before the bachelor handed out his final rose, a deluge was upon us, the rain hammering down on the house.

"The trees are going to love this storm," Joy commented, always finding the positive in any situation.

As I walked outside, I quickly hopped into my truck, and hell, I couldn't help myself. I drove past the new girl's driveway and checked out the car sitting outside. My chest tightened as the unique vehicle clicked in my mind, and my jaw dropped.

"No way," I muttered, looking at the car that was more than familiar to me.

It couldn't be.

There was no way…

Fuck.

Putting my truck into park, I hopped out and hurried over to the vehicle, trespassing like the dumbass I was, but I couldn't help it. I moved around the car, looking at all the drawings on it, and then I paused by the back, near the trunk. Right above the tire, there it was—a heart with the initials JK + KL inside. The words 'friends forever' was written below it.

"No way," I said breathlessly, stumbling backward. My hand raked through my dripping wet hair as shock almost knocked me out. I should've known. I should've connected the dots instantly, but it'd been over fifteen years since I'd last seen her—the girl who had obviously grown up to be quite a woman.

Kennedy Lost.

Kennedy Lost was the new girl on the block, and she was living right between the Jeffersons and Joy. How? How was that even possible? There was no way. No fucking way. What in the world had brought her here? How had it ended up that she landed in my hometown? What did it mean? What the hell was I supposed to do with this new information? Did I do anything?

No.

Of course not.

It was a long time ago. We were just two stupid kids. She was just a part of my past—nothing more, nothing less.

But still…

I thought a part of me knew it was her the moment I locked eyes with her in the woods. I had felt a tug at my frozen heart the minute she looked my way, but I'd done my best to deem it heartburn because I didn't want it to be her. Not after all the years that had passed. Not after the changes that had taken place in my life. Not with the man I'd become over time because I was not the boy she used to know.

I didn't need visitors from my past to come back to haunt my present day. My mind was already a professional at haunting me with past regrets every single day. I didn't need more ghosts coming back to me. But damn…

Kennedy Lost.

Not only was she this beautiful individual who had curves in places that hadn't existed when we were kids, her hair was longer, and her curls were sun-kissed as they fell in front of her face. Her skin glowed as if she bathed beneath the sun, and her eyes…

Fuck, Kennedy and those eyes.

Leave, I told myself.

I needed to pull away from her house and not allow my brain to let her in. I needed to stop thinking about her. I couldn't travel down that road.

After seeing that beat-up yellow car proved who she was, my frozen heart tried to do the stupidest thing in the world—it tried to beat, but the stone-cold crystal sitting in my chest couldn't perform the task. It didn't know how.

I got into my truck and I drove away. I had to drive away. As I made it back home, I didn't head straight to bed. Instead, I walked in the rain through the darkened woods I knew like the back of my hand, heading toward the field of flowers. Dozens I'd planted throughout the years that were in full bloom. The most common flower was the daisy.

I walked to the bench in the middle of the field and sat down as the water washed over my skin. The flowers drank up the water droplets as I closed my eyes and looked up at the sky. I was soaked head to toe, but I didn't mind. Truthfully, I always felt renewed when I was able to sit out in a storm.

I felt as if it regenerated me the same way it did the flowers.

Taking a few silent breaths, I allowed my mind to still, like always. I was alone out there in those abandoned woods, like always. Then I headed home and crawled into my bed, like always.

The only difference this time was no matter how hard I tried to stop it from happening, Kennedy kept crossing my mind. In an instant, I wasn't the man I had become. I was back to the time when I was a scared little boy who wanted a damn friend to make the shitty days go away.

8

Jax
Eleven years old
Year one of summer camp

I talked to myself a lot.

Not loudly or anything, just mumbles every now and again. Dad said he hated when I mumbled, but my mumbles were for me and no one else to hear. Sometimes I wished I had a friend who mumbled too so we could mumble together for only us to hear, but for the time being, the only person I could mumble to was myself.

Currently, my mumbles were about Kennedy Lost.

"What a weird girl," I murmured.

Kennedy was sitting in a mud pile, building what looked like a castle while everyone else was doing arts and crafts inside during our free time. The rain poured down on her, making her look like a wet mop, and she sang some kind of song as she bounced her head back and forth.

That girl was always singing. She probably sang even more than she talked, and she talked—*a lot.* Her talking wasn't mumbling; it was the loudest thing ever, her words never seemed to run out. She was like the longest run-on sentence ever.

She talked nice and loud to anyone and everyone who would give her a minute of their attention. She was the definition of an

Energizer Bunny—she went on and on and on, and her batteries never ran out. I would have bet she even talked in her sleep at a million miles per minute.

She was such a strange person. I'd never seen a stranger person when I met Kennedy Lost at summer camp that year. She was always getting into trouble, wandering off and doing her own messy thing even though she'd get yelled at for it.

I was sure the moment Miss Jessie saw Kennedy, she'd be in big trouble.

Kennedy wouldn't even care, though. Her messy, tangled, honey-colored curly hair matched her golden eyes of mischief. I'd never seen golden eyes before I met Kennedy. They had splashes of brown in them, too. Not that I was looking at her eyes too closely, because whenever I looked at Kennedy for too long, she'd look back and smile at me in a way that made my stomach turn upside down.

She made me sick, but the kind of sick that felt a little good… kind of. I hadn't known feeling sick to your stomach could feel good until I met Kennedy.

Kennedy stood and held her hands out wide as she looked up at the rain clouds. Didn't she know lightning could strike and kill her? I'd once seen a documentary with Mom about how many people died in lightning storms, and sure, maybe it wasn't a lot, but it was enough to keep me from ever wanting to stand outside in the rain with bolts of fire flashing throughout the sky. She was oddly close to a tree, too—a tree she'd no doubt hugged earlier in the day.

Kennedy Lost—the tree-hugging, mud-castle-building oddball at camp.

"Is that Kennedy out there?" Miss Jessie exclaimed as she looked out the window at the girl who was now dancing in the rain beside her messy castle like a wild thing.

Where do the wild things grow, you ask? Wherever Kennedy Lost was found.

Miss Jessie shot outside toward the weirdo, and all of us rushed over to the window to watch as Kennedy got yelled at and dragged off to her cabin to get cleaned up.

"What a freak," someone muttered.

A lot of people called her mean names, and I knew Kennedy heard them sometimes, but she didn't seem to care. I wished I were like that. I wished I couldn't have cared less about what people thought of me, especially my dad, but for some reason, I cared what

he thought about me more than anyone else in the world.

As Miss Jessie walked Kennedy back to her cabin, the weird girl danced the whole way there.

For the most part, I hated camp. I hated the sports, and the games, and the group activities. I hated being away from home—well, kind of. I missed Mom because I figured she missed me, too. I didn't miss Dad because it seemed as if I was never good enough for him even though I tried my hardest. Dad loved my older brother, Derek, a lot more than he loved me. Derek wasn't even his biological son, but still, he got Dad's love the most. They liked all the same kind of stuff—football, hunting, action movies. I wasn't a good son like Derek, and Dad made me feel bad about it all the time, too.

He sent me to camp hoping I'd get better at certain things and man up. Mom sent me to camp in hopes I'd make friends.

I wasn't good at manning up or making friends, even though that was all I'd ever wanted.

People called me weird—kind of like how I called Kennedy weird, I supposed, but I didn't dance in the rain and build castles out of mud. I was actually the complete opposite of Kennedy Lost. She was loud, and I was reserved. She dressed in all the colors of the rainbow while my clothes were black, white, or gray. She always yapped on and on about made-up stories while I stayed mute. She even wore her curly hair wild with the tips dyed purple while mine stayed brown, tamed, and in place.

It was odd how two weird people could be complete opposites.

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* * *

"Let me go!" I shouted as my camp bunkmates dragged me out of the room in the middle of the night. James, Ryan, and the leader of their pack, Lars freaking Parker, wouldn't let me go. Lars was from my hometown, and he bullied me during the whole school year. I shouldn't have been surprised when he kept bullying me at camp.

It was pouring rain, and the three guys were pissed at me for making them lose at flag football earlier that day. I hadn't even wanted to play, and my team hadn't wanted me to either, but the camp had a stupid 'nobody left behind' rule that made me a bully's prime target.

My dad would've liked them all because they were good at that guy stuff.

"Shut up, cry baby!" Lars hollered, wrapping his hands around my wrists as Ryan and James each grabbed one of my ankles.

I hadn't even wanted to play flag football. I hadn't even wanted to go to summer camp!

I hated it! I hated it so much I could have cried.

"Let me go, let me go, let me go!" I shouted.

"Oh, we'll let you go—right after we throw you into the trash bin like the garbage you are," Lars said. It was clear he was the ringleader of the circus of jerks. Ryan and James pretty much did anything he said. I wondered how people got powerful like that, how they could just get anyone to follow anything they said.

"You're not throwing anyone anywhere," a voice said. I looked over my shoulder to see Kennedy standing there in the pouring rain with a bow and arrow in her grip. She held the arrow pointed straight at Lars's face and *ohmygosh* weird Kennedy Lost was a freaking psychopath. "Drop Jax and no one gets hurt."

"Oh look, Jax's freaky girlfriend came to save the day!" Ryan mocked.

"Oh look, Ryan is so basic he couldn't think of a better comment to make. Really, Ryan, work on your insults. They lack authenticity, much like your whole persona—or should I call you Lars number two?" Kennedy mocked them right back before I could express that she wasn't my girlfriend.

That was another difference between her and me—she wasn't afraid to stand up for herself.

"Will you just go away, Kennedy? This has nothing to do with you," James said.

"Sorry, Lars number three, I can't let you do this. Just put him down, and no one will get hurt." She shot an arrow that landed right between James' feet.

"Are you insane?" he barked, jumping in the air and dropping my foot to the ground.

Kennedy didn't reply. She simply reached into the backpack she was wearing, pulled out another arrow, and shot it straight between Ry—er, Lars number two's feet.

He jumped and dropped his hold on my other foot.

Two legs free, two arms to go.

Lars cocked an eyebrow at Kennedy as his two sidekicks scurried

behind their ringleader. He held me in front of him and gave her a cocky smirk. “You can’t shoot with Jax in front of me, Kennedy. So you might as well—”

She shot her next arrow straight past me, and it grazed Lars’s ear.

Holy crap! She’d almost given him an ear piercing! I’d have bet if she’d really wanted to, she could’ve put a hole straight through said ear.

“I can do anything,” Kennedy barked, and funnily enough, I was starting to believe her. “Now, let him go because next time, I won’t miss.”

I knew Lars wasn’t showing it, but I felt his trembles as he released his hold on me.

Kennedy reached back in her bag for another arrow but froze when she realized that there were none left.

Lars smirked. “Looks like the freak is out of weapons. Now I’m going to kick both of your butts.”

I began shaking as I ran beside Kennedy. She turned my way. “It’s okay, Jax, just bark.”

“What?” I asked, nervous.

“Bark at them! People get freaked out if you start barking at them and then they’ll leave you alone. Watch.” She turned back toward Lars and his friends and began barking like a dog. “Woof! Woof! Woof!” she howled, leaving me stunned and a little scared.

What a weird, weird girl.

But it seemed to be working. The guys began backing up, so I started doing it, too. “Woof! Woof!” I said, probably sounding more like a poodle compared to Kennedy’s rottweiler, but I kept going until the guys backed off. “*Wooooooof!*”

Lars shook his head while stepping away from us. “Whatever, losers. Come on, guys. Let’s go back to the bunk. If you’re smart, Jax, you won’t come back tonight unless you want to get your butt kicked.”

The three dashed off, and I stood there a bit stunned as Kennedy placed her bow into her backpack and then began dancing in the rain. “See? Whenever someone is bothering you, bark at them. It always works.”

“Always?”

“Yeah, like fifty percent of the time.”

“That’s not always.”

“Oh, then not always, I guess.”

“What were you even doing out here?” I asked, soaking wet, dazed, and confused.

Kennedy looked back at me, and her lips curved up into a crooked smile.

Who knew crooked smiles could look…cute?

Whatever. It wasn’t that I was noticing that Kennedy’s smile was cute. Because it wasn’t. I mean, it was, but I wasn’t noticing it because I didn’t notice those kinds of things about Kennedy Lost.

She raised her eyebrow. “Oh, I was shooting archery.”

“In the pouring rain?”

She nodded. “Yes. It makes you a better shooter if you work against the elements of nature. The rain adds an obstacle that forces me to think outside the box and do something different.” She pulled out her bow and held it out toward me. “Do you want to try?”

I shook my head. “No. I want to go get dry.”

“Okay. I can walk you to your bunk and you can grab some of your clothes. Then you can sleep in my bed with me so the guys don’t bother you.”

“I don’t need some girl watching after me,” I spat out, feeling embarrassed.

“Yes, you do,” she replied, not in a mean way, just as a fact. “Now come on, I’ll keep my arrows pointed at them as you get your stuff.”

Even though I wanted to argue with her, I knew better than to fight with an unstable girl holding a bow and arrow.

We went to my cabin, and I gathered some clothes for the night as Kennedy protected me from the guys.

They didn’t say a word.

When I got to her cabin, her roommates were already sleeping. Thank God. The last thing I needed was for people to think I was in love with a girl like Kennedy Lost.

I changed in the bathroom, and Kennedy changed after me—putting on yet another brightly colored pajama set. Only Kennedy would have neon green pajamas.

She crawled into her bed, and I reluctantly crawled in beside her. The last time I’d been in bed with a girl was—oh, that’s right.

Never.

I’d never been in bed with a girl.

She turned to face me and gave me that stupid cute crooked

smile that made my stomach sick. “Why didn’t you dance in the rain out there, Jax?”

“I don’t dance in the rain.”

“Then when do you dance?”

“Never.”

She frowned, and holy crap, that was cute, too. She flipped over and turned her back to me. “You should dance in the rain. It will make you happy.”

“I am happy.”

“You’ll be even happier if you dance in the rain.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I said nothing.

“You don’t talk a lot, do you?” she asked.

“No.”

“That’s okay. I talk a lot. I go on and on and on and on and”—she took a deep breath—“on with words even though they don’t really lead me anywhere.”

I couldn’t disagree with that.

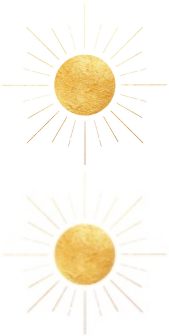
I shifted around on her bed that I wasn’t supposed to be in. “I have to be out of here before anyone wakes up. People can’t see us in the same bed.”

She yawned. “Don’t worry, I always wake up before everyone to go talk to the birds that sing to me in the morning.”

I yawned because she yawned, and now we were yawning together. “You’re a very weird girl, Kennedy.”

In my head, I could see her cute crooked smile that made me sick as she replied, “Thank you, Jax.”

9



Kennedy
Present day

It rained for three days straight, and I was exhausted.

I hated storms. I was never able to sleep through them, and when I was alone, I couldn't shut off my brain. My anxiety was through the roof. I missed Penn. Well, not him as much as having someone lying beside me in bed during the storms. The comfort of having another warm human beside me when I was in the midst of my lowest points always made them seem that much easier.

Now I was dealing with my anxiety alone, and there was no secret that it was getting to me. I wasn't sure what was more exhausted, my body or my mind.

I tried to do as much as I could to keep busy. I made lists of things I wanted to do to be brave. I tried my best to meditate. I cried sometimes, too, because Yoana said crying was brave.

Then I waited for the storm to pass, and thankfully, I knew that no matter how big the storm, they'd always pass no matter what. After every storm, the sun would shine again.

It took a few days for the sun to come out, and when it did, the landscaping team showed up. Even though I was extremely fatigued, I was ready to see what they had planned to whip the yard

into shape. It was a beautiful space, and I could only imagine that Yoana had her own outline and plans already forming in her mind for what she wanted her yard to look like. I couldn't wait to see the landscapers make it come to life.

When two trucks pulled up with materials to get started, I headed outside to greet Lars, the owner of the company. I'd heard from Louise and Kate how he was the best landscaper in town—granted, he was the only one—and that he was smoking hot and dreamy.

They weren't wrong about his good looks. With his blond shaggy hair and a deep left dimple, I could see the charm.

Lars spoke to three of his employees, giving them each their set of tasks before he turned to me for a greeting. First, his eyes greeted me as they danced up and down my body. When he met my stare, a sinister smirk curved his lips.

"Well, hello there. I've heard many things about the new girl in town. It's nice to finally meet you."

"It seems news travels fast around here. I'm Kennedy."

"I'm Lars, the owner of Lars Landscaping. It's an honor to meet you," he said, holding his hand out toward me.

I went in for a handshake, but he scooped my hand into his palm and placed his lips upon my skin.

Gross.

I quickly pulled my hand away from him.

Just like that, his good looks got knocked down a few pegs. He was being so cocky about—well, everything. It was clear Lars knew he was good-looking, and he probably received a lot of attention from many females in Havenbarrow. For me, though, there was no bigger turn-off than a man who knew he was handsome and thought he could get away with things based solely on his looks.

Even though I hadn't known Lars for more than two seconds, I was getting a lot of bad vibes coming from him.

He kept smirking, looking like a sly fox. "It's nice to have someone new in town. It's easy to get sick of seeing the same faces around all the time. Is it just you and your"—he glanced down at my ring finger, which was bare—"boyfriend…?"

I rubbed my hands together and shook my head. "No. Just me."

"Single?" he asked, perking up.

I smiled, but in the pit of my stomach, I felt sick. I didn't like where this was leading, and I would've loved for the conversation

to shift directions, so that was exactly what I was going to make happen. What was it about that man that made me uneased? Something about him felt so familiar.

"Yes, I am. Well, let me get out of your hair. I just wanted to say hello. I won't be a bother at all. If there is anything you need, I'll be inside. As you know, this place actually belongs to my sister and brother-in-law, so most changes should probably be run past them, but I can get in touch with them quickly if needed."

"Don't feel as if you need to stay hidden in that house. If you want, you can always come out here and get down and dirty with me," Lars said. Then he winked.

He winked, and I wanted to throw up right then and there.

Instead, I pushed out a Southern charm smile, nodded once, turned on my heels, and walked back toward the house. I was almost certain the guy was looking at my ass as I turned my back to him, and that thought alone gave me grossed-out chills.

I nearly jumped out of my skin and flinched when Lars unexpectedly touched my shoulder.

I shot around to face him with panic in my eyes.

He tossed his hands up in surrender. "Whoa, whoa. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to spook you."

My heart was pounding rapidly in my chest as I took a step back and wrapped my arms around my frame. "No, it's okay. Sorry. Just easily jumpy."

"I just wanted to say you look beautiful today," Lars stated, allowing his eyes to roam all over me once more. The discomfort started to rise from the pit of my stomach and settled heavily within my throat.

"Thank you," I said even though I wanted much more stern words about his inappropriate comments to leave my mouth. Instead, I turned back around to leave.

Before I walked up the steps to the house, I noticed Mr. Personality sitting on the front porch next door with Joy, sharing a cup of coffee. His eyes were zoomed in on me, and the intensity of his stare sent chills down my spine. I tilted my head in his direction as confusion washed over me. His eyes looked as if he was thinking something, but I couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was he was expressing toward me. I had a feeling it wouldn't be the first time I'd be left perplexed by his distant, cold stares.

I had a strong feeling Mr. Personality and I would share many

looks of bafflement with one another.

Maybe one day, I'd be able to look away faster, but for now, my eyes had a way of lingering on his. Something was different about him this time. Something was holding his stare on me. For the first time since I'd come to town, Mr. Personality didn't quickly look away from me. He focused in, tilted his head, and—for a moment—his eyes looked concerned.

He turned away, and I went back inside to take a shower and wash off the discomfort Lars had created in me.

Before the afternoon was over, Lars made three more moves on me, leaving me feeling completely uncomfortable. I wasn't sure how the next weeks were going to go with having him work on the property. I'd spent five years being uncomfortable in a loveless marriage. The last thing I wanted was to be uncomfortable with a complete stranger.

Not only was I dealing with Lars seemingly coming on to me, but I was also still having plenty of 'friendly' visits from various townspeople.

People were still showing up at my house to introduce themselves to me, and frankly it was getting exhausting. The more they came, the more invasive they were becoming—asking me questions about my dating life, curious if I was interested in a date with their cousin Bernie who hadn't dated a girl ever in his life, wondering if I was interested in donating to the elementary school's autumn performance of *Macbeth*. That seemed a bit heavy for a kid's show, but hey, who was I to say?

I somehow ended up writing a check for that one—those ladies were pushy.

If you thought the mothers of Havenbarrow were aggressive, wait till you hear about the daughters selling their Girl Scout cookies. Somehow I ended up ordering enough cookies to feed an army—or a sad self on a Friday night.

The worst of them all was still Louise and Kate, who found themselves more and more interested in knowing about who I was as a person and even more intrigued by digging up some kind of dirt from my past.

"Hey, sweetheart," the two sang as they stood in front of my front door one Saturday afternoon. "We wanted to check in on you and see how you're adjusting to little ole Havenbarrow. Lord knows it must be a big change from being a city girl like you were before."

Fact: I never told them I was a city girl. I told nosy Nancy that when she stopped by the other day with muffins.

Another fact: Don't trust nosy Nancy, no matter how good her muffins are.

"I'm doing good, ladies."

"Oh, yes. That's good and all," Kate said, pursing her lips, "but if you don't mind me prying, what are you going to do here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean no offense, Kennedy," she started, which meant something offensive was about to be said. but you can't just sit around here and not have a job. Don't you have bigger ambitions than that? I mean, you're what, twenty-nine, thirty?" she asked.

The insult was loud and clear through her tone, and I wasn't sure how I restrained myself from slamming the door in her face.

"Twenty-eight," I answered.

They both frowned. "That's a shame," Louise said. "You're too old to be doing nothing. Maybe you should come to the mani-pedi nights I host with a few other gals. We have one next week. Perhaps one of the girls in town can get you started with a job. You know what they say—network, network, network! And honey, I'm sure your nails will thank you for the pampering. Plus, what about dating? Mary's cousin Bernie is single. He's a bit odd, too. Quirky, I should say—like you. I bet you two would be a great fit!"

Not Bernie again. "Thank you for the offer, but I think I'm going to have to pass." Part of me wanted to tell them about my novels. About how I've had a successful career. A bigger part of me knew I didn't own them a thing.

"You should really consider having Bernie take you out on a date. At your age, you should settle down, don't you think? I bet you want kids at some point, don't you? Time is ticking, and it only gets harder the longer you wait."

Wow.

They had crossed a line, and they didn't even care that they had. More and more each day, I was becoming certain that I wouldn't be able to stay in that house with these two women living right down the street.

"I'm sorry, that's kind of a private question, and—"

Louise cut in. "Did you know you can freeze your eggs? I read an article that you can do that."

Before I could reply, Louise was waving over at Lars, who was

digging up some dead plants. “Hey, Lars. It’s good to see you,” she sang, eyeing him up and down like he was a T-bone steak she was going to devour. “I see you’ve still been working hard as always.”

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and gave a devilish smirk. “You know I can’t keep myself from getting my hands dirty, Louise.” He then winked at me, and my stomach flipped fifty-seven times.

Louise fanned herself and blushed as if she wasn’t a married woman while Lars went back to work. “Wow, my gosh. If I were still a single girl, I would love to get down and dirty with that man.”

“Amen,” Kate sang along with her sister. “Anyway, let us know about the pedicures, Kennedy! And about Bernie. You two would get along so well. I just know it.”

The two hurried away, and I’d have been lying if I said I missed them when they left.

At the end of the day, Lars came knocking on the door to let me know his team had headed out. “Let me show you what we’ve accomplished today,” he said, gesturing to the front yard.

With a hesitant smile, I followed after him. We walked around as he gestured here and there, explaining what it would look like a few months from now. He spoke about the garden that would be placed in the back yard and went on and on about the lighting fixtures that would be put in place. He boasted about how talented and intelligent—and single—he was, sometimes touching on the amount of success his business had achieved in Havenbarrow. Then, as we were looking toward the corner where the lilac bush would go—Mama’s favorite flower—he placed his hand on my lower back, and I shot forward.

“What are you doing?” I said, feeling a jolt of nerves rushing through my system.

He cocked an eyebrow, apparently baffled. “I’m sorry? I was just __”

“Touching my lower back without my permission,” I spat out. “And frankly, that is highly inappropriate.”

Instead of apologizing for his actions, Lars rolled his eyes. “Come on, lady. It’s not like you haven’t been coming on to me all day since I arrived here with my team. The signs seemed pretty clear.”

“There were no signs. I wasn’t coming on to you at all.”

“There’s no need to lie about it,” he argued, raking his hands through his hair as if he were the most confident man alive. “I get it. You’re a good-looking girl. I’m a good-looking guy. It only makes sense that”—he placed his hand on my shoulder, sending chills down my spine—“we’d be attracted to each other.”

“I’m not,” I said, my voice growing louder as I tossed his hand from my shoulder. “And if you touch me one more time, you’ll regret it.”

“No need to be a bitch,” he huffed. “The truth is, you’re not even my type.”

What is it with men who can’t accept the fact that a woman isn’t interested in them and therefore become defensive?

“You’re a little too plump in all the wrong places,” he said, eyeing me up and down.

“It’s time for you to leave,” I ordered, my voice stern even though I was shaking a little bit on the inside. At least in my marriage, I knew the monster that was coming home to me each night. But with Lars? A complete stranger? I didn’t know where he drew his lines of anger.

“Whatever. I’ll be back tomorrow to get to work.”

“It’s probably best if you don’t come back,” I said, knowing there was no way Yoana would be comfortable with someone like him working on their property. She’d never want me to feel uncomfortable. And Lars? He was the definition of discomfort.

He snickered, shaking his head. “You don’t have the right to fire me. As you said, your sister is my client—not you.”

“And my sister will be getting a call from me the moment you leave. Now, leave.”

“Listen, lady—” he said, stepping toward me, making me flinch backward. Gosh, I hated that. I hated him seeing reaction escape from me. I hated how I saw the flicker of confidence my flinching gave him. I hated looking weak in front of men. I hated feeling boxed in.

His chest puffed out as he stood taller. “I can’t have you messing with my income, so we are going to have to figure something out.”

“Or how about this? How about you listen and leave her property,” a voice said, making Lars and me both look in the direction of Joy’s house. There he stood, Mr. Personality at the short fence that separated Joy’s yard from mine. His eyes were stern and filled with…anger? Was that anger? Only this time the

maddening look was focused on Lars.

"How about you mind your own fucking business, buddy?"

Mr. Personality walked around the fence and then over to my yard. He stood face to face with Lars, and within seconds, Lars looked like a little fish about to be eaten by a shark. Sure, Lars was a bigger guy, tall and somewhat fit, but Mr. Personality was fit. Like *fit* fit. Like, *will lift a car with his pinky and not break a sweat* fit.

They had a staring contest for a few moments before Lars stepped back and surrendered. "Whatever, man. I don't have time for this." Lars turned his stare to me, and his blue eyes looked a little colder. "Good luck finding another landscaper to finish this shit. I'm the only one in town, so congratulations—you've fucked over your sister's yard."

"Leave," Mr. Personality hissed, his stare still throwing daggers at Lars.

"Okay, okay, asshole." With a sinister snicker, Lars tossed his hands up into the air. "Don't shoot."

Those words rolled off his tongue in a disturbing fashion, and now it was time for Mr. Personality to stumble backward a bit. His eyes flashed with emotion before he blinked it away. What was that? What was the story behind his slip of emotion?

Lars hurried away, and I watched a slow exhausted sigh fall from Mr. Personality's lips as his shoulders dropped. The grizzly bear before me let go of his growl.

Relief rolled through me as I smiled toward Mr. Personality. "Thanks for that. I was about—"

"What the hell are you doing?" he snapped, his hard tone throwing me for a loop.

"What?"

"Why would you let him harass you like that for the whole day? Then, on top of that, you keep letting these nosy people come to your house and belittle you."

I stood a bit straighter. "What are you talking about?"

"Every day, these people have been bringing you shit while shitting on you with their backhanded comments. They were pretty much spitting their disrespect straight into your face, and you just allowed it like you don't have a freaking backbone."

Wow. Okay. Apparently we were back to the aggressive, rude guy I met in the woods. "It's really none of your business."

"If you don't shut them down right now, they aren't ever going

to pull back on being so aggressive and in your business."

"And why do you care how people treat me?"

His eyes flashed with a softness, and I swore I saw a person I'd once known. He stuffed his hands into his jeans pockets and shrugged. "I'm just saying. The people in this town are walking trolls. If you have to play the bad guy, take on that role. Don't stay timid, though. They love to break the timid. They'll drive you crazy, push you up against a wall, attack you repeatedly until you snap—and believe me, you will snap—and then they'll ask you why you snapped."

"You still didn't answer my question. Why do you care how people treat me?" I asked.

"I don't," he harshly muttered, brushing the back of his hand across his forehead. "But you don't care how they treat you, either. Pretty sure that's the real problem at hand."

I wanted to argue with him. I wanted to tell him he was wrong, say I didn't care a lick what these townspeople thought of me, but the truth was I did care. I wanted them to like me, because more than being bullied, I feared being unloved.

My husband had made sure to put that fear into me—that I was unlovable. All I wanted to do was be loved, even if it meant breaking my own heart in order to get people to like me. That was a very depressing fact.

"A word of advice from the town asshole?" he offered.

"By all means, enlighten me."

"Get a solid backbone. Stand up for yourself. Push back when they push up against you."

"I don't know if taking advice from the town asshole is such a solid idea. I don't want to be a loner like you. I want to have friends."

His eyes shifted away from me for a split second. When he looked back, I swore I saw…hurt? Had I hurt him with my words?

"I have friends," he said, sure as ever. "People who mean the goddamn world to me. People who get me when the rest of the world tries to break me."

My stomach knotted up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that…"

"You did, and that's fine, but before you sit here judging me, focus on yourself right now. Decide if you truly want these people as friends. People aren't careful about who they give themselves to nowadays because they think being liked is more important than

being respected. These people will kill you."

I laughed. "I doubt Louise and Kate are going to take my life."

"I'm not talking about taking your life. I'm talking about them taking something more important."

"And what's that?"

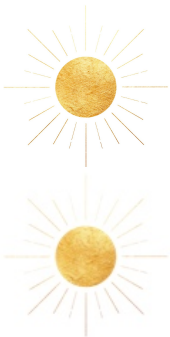
"Your soul."

I didn't know what to say, didn't know what to do. I just stood still as day as he moved in closer to me and spoke so softly. "Bark at them, Kennedy. Bark."

He took a step backward, taking my breath along with him. My chest was so tight as he walked away. His words were sending chills down my spine as they played on repeat in my head, as if they were trying to unlock something within my memories.

Bark at them, Kennedy. Bark.

10



Kennedy

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry he treated you like that, Kennedy. What a freaking dick,” Yoana said through the phone as I yawned and stretched in bed. My back was extremely sick and tired of me being an idiot and sleeping in a car for the past few nights, so I’d moved myself inside to an actual bed like a real grown-up. I was so happy when the furniture finally arrived and the house began feeling more like a home.

“Yes,” I agreed, referring to Lars and the way he’d treated me the previous day. “I’m just sorry I lost your landscaper.”

“Whatever. It’s not a big deal. I’m sure someone else will come along. What matters most is that you’re okay. Do you need me to come home? I can come home. I can come home if you need me.”

“I am one hundred percent sure you’re not needed back in town.” I laughed.

“Really? Because Bora Bora is a complete bore. All we do is sunbathe and drink fruity drinks.”

“Gosh, what a hard, hard life.”

“You’re telling me. Plus there’s this guy who’s been following me around telling me he loves me nonstop and catering to my every want and need.”

I cocked an eyebrow as if she could see me. “You mean…your husband?”

“Husband.” She sighed, shaking her head back and forth. “What a freaking weird word. I have a husband.” She giggled, sounding smitten as ever.

“You sure do. You got a good one. Be thankful for that…there’s a lot of terrible fish in the sea.”

“Speaking of terrible fish…have you heard from your squid?”

My chest tightened, and I pulled my hair into a messy bun. “I haven’t.”

“Well, that’s good, right? Not hearing from him is a good thing.”

Maybe. Still, a part of me felt odd about not hearing from him at all. I tried my best not to think about it. The more I thought about it, the more I thought about my past, and that was hard for me. I wasn’t good at dealing with my past. It was too hard for me to face.

“Yeah, it’s good. Side note,” I said, shifting the conversation, “if you are interested in knowing, my neighbors are the most nosy people in the world.”

“Oh gosh, that’s great to know. I bet they are having a field day with you.”

“The biggest of field days. I’m kind of surprised a fruit pie or loaf of bread hasn’t shown up today.”

“It’s still early—I’m sure it’s on its way,” she joked. “What else is the town like? Is it the Southern Stars Hollow of our dreams?” Yoana asked, her voice filled with hope. “Are there bake sales and town parades because it’s Tuesday? Is there a Luke’s Diner? Oh my gosh, please tell me there’s a Luke’s Diner.”

I laughed. “I still haven’t walked around the town, actually, but you do have the cutest quirky neighbor. Oh, and fair warning—the town asshole owns the woods behind your property. I wouldn’t wander them if I were you. He’s the opposite of a people person.”

“Ohhh, interesting. Is he a Luke type of antisocial or a Jess antisocial?”

If there was anything Yoana and I were professionals at, it was talking in *Gilmore Girls* references.

“Jess. Totally a Jess.”

“Is he hot? Oh gosh, please tell me he’s hot.”

Oh, was Mr. Personality a fine specimen of an asshole. If grumpy smolders could kill, I would’ve been dead ten times over by now. It was as if someone took Damon from *The Vampire Diaries*, tossed in a

little Hook from *Once Upon A Time*, and voila! Mr. Personality was born. If brooding was an Olympic sport, he'd take gold.

"That's not the point," I said, trying my hardest to shake off his obvious sex appeal because I was still on a mission to hate him—even if he did hang out with the elderly in his free time and save me from people like Lars. That didn't cancel out his shortness with me or his moody personality.

"It is the point, Kennedy. It's okay to find the town asshole sexy."

And I did. It was just that Yoana didn't need to know that fact—nor did anyone else—because it had no relevance to anything. Was Mr. Personality drop-dead gorgeous with locks of dark brown hair that fell in front of his face in the sexiest of ways? Yes. Had his deep eyes of mystery entranced me for a moment in time? Sure, yeah, whatever. Time stood still, blah blah, blah. That didn't change the fact that he was lacking people skills. No amount of full lips or chiseled jawlines could change that fact.

His good looks and mysterious nature simply made looking away a bit more difficult.

"If you keep talking, I'm going to hang up the phone," I joked, standing to walk into the bathroom.

"Fine, fine, but what do you mean you haven't been into town yet? Don't tell me you've been antisocial. You have to get out! Explore. Meet new people."

"Trust me, I don't have to meet new people. They have a way of coming straight to my front porch."

"You need to get out, Kennedy. It will be good for you."

"But your house is so big and comfy," I playfully teased, trying to shift the direction the conversation was going. I could tell by Yoana's sigh that she was worried. I knew it was because she was concerned about my mental health, which had been suffering majorly throughout the past few months. She wanted me to be okay, which I understood completely. I wanted that, too. These things just took time. I had to heal on my own terms—even when the rest of the world wanted me to get over it sooner than later.

That didn't seem fair to me, though. It was my trauma, after all, not theirs.

But my husband had already left me because of my inability to move forward with my life. I couldn't also lose my sister for the very same reasons.

“I just worry about you, Kenny,” she said, using the nickname Mama used to call me. My stomach fluttered with nerves as it fell from her lips. “You’ve been through so much. After losing Mama and Daddy and Da—”

“I’ll explore today,” I offered, cutting her off before she could go into mentioning the accident that had burned my soul. “I’ll see what’s going on in this place,” I said, trying to sound hopeful so Yoana’s worries could evaporate.

The sigh that slipped through the phone speaker was much more relaxed this time. “Oh, Kennedy, you’re going to love it! Nathan talked me into flipping the house out there by offering me a few highlights of Havenbarrow. There’s an old-fashioned drive-in movie theater that only plays black and white movies, and every other Friday night is a romantic movie,” she urged, piquing my interest.

“Oh? Do go on.”

“There’s a coffee shop that has a stray cat named Marshmallow that wanders around.”

Okay, she was now tickling my fancy.

“And, and, and!” she exclaimed, her excitement coming through loud and clear. “The library has a secret bookshelf! At least that’s the urban legend. The bookshelf leads to a hidden reading nook, and you have to find the right book to unlock it. Rumor has it no one has found it yet, but it’s supposed to be there.”

Challenge accepted.

“You can even take Mama and Daddy’s car out to get around,” Yoana said with a splash of hope.

That was definitely taking things too far. She knew about my issues with driving. I wasn’t ready to jump off the diving board just yet. “One step at a time, sis.”

I could almost feel her guilty smile coming through the phone. “I had to try.”

After hanging up with Yoana, in an attempt to avoid the invasive individuals bearing baked goods and to push myself out of my comfort zone, I walked into town to find some breakfast.

The café had a very Luke’s Diner feel to it with the random tables scattered around and red leather booths along the walls. The stools that sat at the front counter were occupied by individuals chatting, using their actual voices instead of staring down at their cell phones. There was a sign on the wall in front of the coffee station that read, *No cell phones. Connect and unplug or get the eff out.*

Now, if that wasn't a Luke's Diner comment, I didn't know what was. I guessed there was no need to ask if they had a Wi-Fi password I could use. I slid my phone into my purse and sat down in a booth. It didn't take long for my steak and eggs to be delivered to me, and then I turned my attention to the window for my dining entertainment. An adorable puppy was leashed across the street.

Don't do it, pup.

The owner of the dog was yelling at someone on her cell phone and flailing her arms around like a madwoman. The dog's leash was tied to a bike rack, and every few seconds, it would tug on the leather strap, loosening the knot a hair. He was trying to reach the stray cat sitting on the opposite side of the busy street, licking its paws clean.

The owner didn't notice her dog's level of distress, too busy screaming into her phone to concern herself with the fact that her dog was about to take off running into traffic.

The pacing of my heartbeats became erratic. The dog's leash was almost loose. He was almost freed from the restraint in place for his own protection. "No," I muttered to myself, my hands shaking, hoping the dog would sit and stay where it was.

The cat stretched himself out, making the dog even more frantic. The alertness in the dog's eyes and its loud barks should've made the owner take note, but she hadn't.

Imagine being that disconnected from one's surroundings.

"No!" I screamed, my voice cracking as the sound shot from my lips. People glanced my way, but I didn't care.

I leaped up from my booth as chills raced through my body, and two seconds later, the leash was free, the dog was in the street, and my heart was in my throat.

Before the dog could leap in front of a car, before a gruesome sight unfurled right before me, Mr. Personality stepped into the road in front of the moving vehicle and snatched the dog up into his arms.

Mr.

Freaking.

Personality.

Are you kidding me?!

Grown, buff man holding tiny, defenseless puppy against his chest?

Instant lady boner.

The driver of the vehicle slammed his hand to the horn before gesturing in the air with a look of disgust then speeding off.

The owner of the pup turned to see the man with her dog in his arms, and she looked horrified—not by her dog almost losing its life, but by the man who was holding on to the animal.

She snatched her pet away from him and started waving her hands in the air yet again, seemingly cussing him out for saving her pet.

What in the world is wrong with her?

Sure, he was known as the town asshole, but at that moment, he was a dang superhero! She should've been thanking the jerk for his heroic act. Instead, she was cussing him out as if he was the cause of the incident. Mr. Personality stood tall and didn't yell back at her. In fact, he didn't say a word. His full lips stayed pressed together, and he didn't seemed bothered by said woman in the least. Not a raised eyebrow and not a single smile or frown on his lips.

He just seemed…blank.

Completely disconnected from the aggression being blasted his way.

He was better than me at that moment, that was for certain. If it were me, I would've invented curse words using every letter in the alphabet.

As she kept hollering, Mr. Personality turned and walked away from her, leaving the woman with her word vomit and bad pet owner skills.

The bell over the door dinged as he walked into the café. He took a seat at a corner booth, opened a menu, straightened his ballcap, and lowered his head, curving his massive shoulders forward as he studied the menu with too many options.

Why did he do that?

Why did he freaking have to save a pup from oncoming traffic?

Why did he have to make it so hard for me to dislike him?

Mr. Personality was built like a superhero. From his chiseled jawline to his biceps-on-biceps arms, that man probably could've stopped a highspeed train using his man-of-steel chest. It was a shame that when I crossed his path, his people skills didn't match his apparent gym skills. Then again, that would've made him too good to be true.

"If you wanted a plate of salt with a steak and eggs on the side,

you could've just asked," a friendly voice offered, snapping my stare from Mr. Personality to the food I'd been mindlessly shaking salt onto for the past five minutes.

"Sorry," I muttered, placing the saltshaker on the table and lowering myself back down in my seat. I glanced back out at the window to find the woman yelling at her dog for being disobedient.

I felt bad for the dog. The owner seemed like a truly disrespectful person.

"No need to be sorry. We all have our quirky habits," the friendly voice promised.

My eyes moved to the guy speaking. He had thin rose-colored lips and green eyes hidden behind a pair of glasses. His eyes had this talent of being able to smile all on their own. His cheeks were covered in red freckles that matched his spiked orangish-red hair. I took in his name tag and grinned as I read it out loud. "*Marty*." He looked exactly how I would've imagined a Marty to look. Kind of slim, but very tall. Kind of nerdy, but oddly handsome.

"That's me," he said, his lips turning up to match his smiling eyes. "Can I get you another steak and scrambled eggs?"

I hesitated, debating if I wanted to spend more money. Even though Yoana had been determined to shove money into my pockets, I declined. I still had enough in my savings from my books, but with the way I was writing—or *not* writing—I didn't know when more money would come my way. Each nickel needed to matter.

Marty must have been a mind reader because he followed up his offer by saying it would be on the house.

"You wouldn't get in trouble for that?" I asked, my stomach rumbling louder than I wanted it to. A level of embarrassment ran through me as I looked down at my salt-covered plate to avoid his concerned eyes.

"Ah, it's no big deal. My dad owns the place." He cleared his throat and leaned in to whisper, "I'll score you some extra toast, too." Marty lifted my plate off the table after picking it up and placing it back down a total of four times. I didn't mention the odd behavior, but I did offer him a smile.

He looked about my age, maybe a year or so younger.

There was this odd struggle I saw happening in Marty's eyes as he reached for the saltshaker once and placed it back on the table. He lifted it again, placed it down once more. This same action

happened two more times, for a total of four. I arched an eyebrow to see his cheeks redden from some kind of shame.

"Sorry." He laughed nervously. "Just a bad case of OCD." He flinched at his words and my lips turned down. It was apparent that his obsessive-compulsive disorder was something he tried his best to hide but was unable to conceal.

That seemed to be the case with everyone, I supposed—having a secret you tried your best to hide.

I leaned in closer to him. "Don't worry—we all have our quirky habits." I winked his way and watched ease permeate his gaze.

"Is there a problem?" a stern voice asked.

I took my eyes away from Marty to look up at a grown man who was twice his size. Marty's father, I assumed from the looks of things. His name tag told me his name was Gary.

Gary glared at his son and sighed, a look of disappointment in his tired eyes. "Are you freaking out the customers again?"

Before Marty could reply—or drop the shaky plate in his hand—I gripped his insecure hands and turned to Gary with a big smile. "I was just eyeing your red velvet cake in the display over there, and your son Marty here was telling me you have the best in town."

Gary's eyes softened. His lips turned up into a tiny grin as he crossed his arms and pushed out his chest. "That's the truth. Best slice of cake you'll find in Havenbarrow, and all of Kentucky, at that. I make everything from scratch. It's the real deal. Ain't nothing fake like that new chain restaurant across the street, taking all our customers. They use all frozen crap that messes with people's insides. We pride ourselves on using real food. My cake is to die for." It was amazing how manly Gary still appeared as he talked about a cake.

"Well, I'll definitely have to come back one day and check it out."

Gary brushed his palm across his brows. "You definitely do. Well, I better get back to the kitchen. Marty"—Gary's annoyed look returned—"get to wiping down the other tables before the late-morning crowd comes through."

Gary disappeared back into the busy kitchen, where pots and pans could be heard rattling. Marty thanked me for distracting his father for a moment then hurried off to place my new order.

While I waited, I pulled out a pen and a notebook from my purse and began adding to my list of things to do in Havenbarrow.

- Learn to bake a cake from scratch.

Every now and again, I'd glance over at the table where Mr. Personality sat, and a flurry of nerves would hit me at an overwhelming speed. I couldn't keep my eyes off him, no matter how much I tried to avert my gaze. I felt as if I were a straight-up creeper, staring in his direction, yet something about him drew me in and made it almost impossible to look away.

He must've felt my intense glances at him, because when he looked up from his menu, his eyes landed directly on me. Like the psychopath I was, I didn't do the normal thing most people did when they were caught staring at a complete stranger.

I didn't turn my head away.

I didn't pretend to look past him.

I didn't scramble to make a run for it.

Nope, nope, nope.

I simply smiled and parted my lips.

"Hi," I said on an exhalation, loud and clear as he narrowed his eyes.

He blinked three times.

He looked back at his menu, refitted his baseball cap, and rounded his shoulders forward once more, making me feel completely psychotic for even speaking to him. But still, I kept freaking staring.

What was wrong with me?

I'd recently binged the Netflix series *You*, and I was showing some strong Joe tendencies by watching this complete stranger. If I were Joe, this would have been my current stalker thought process:

You stare at the menu completely uncertain about what you're going to order. Will it be the green smoothie for you? The pancakes? The oatmeal? No. You look more like an omelet guy. You wear a hat to hide your face, but I don't know why, seeing as you have a very nice, defined jawline. Even though they are still cold and uninviting, your eyes are worthy of being seen and—holy crap, look the heck away, Kennedy.

What had gotten into me?

I watched as he removed his hat, set it down on the table, and raked his hands through his hair.

Marty came back to the table, did his quirky routine, and placed my food down. I inhaled the amazing aromas arising from my meal. I didn't wait for Marty to walk away before I started shoveling the

food into my mouth in a very unladylike fashion.

"So what brings you to town?" he asked with a bit of wonderment in his eyes, probably in response to how quickly I was stuffing the food into my mouth.

"I'm renting a place from my sister and brother-in-law for the next few months," I said, taking in a forkful of eggs.

"Oh, with your…boyfriend? Husband?" Marty asked.

My stomach knotted up as I glanced down at my ringless finger. It had been a few hours since I'd thought about my past. Leave it to nice Marty to prompt those emotions to come rushing back at me.

"No. Just me."

"You're single?" he said, his voice filled with hope.

I smiled his way, trying to push away the thoughts of my past relationship that he was pulling out of me. "Yes, single and happy about that. I just got out of a long-term relationship and am focusing on me for now."

He grinned, understanding. "Well, if you need a friend in town, I'm more than willing to not hit on you, seeing how you're not really my type." He nodded toward the gentleman sitting at a table directly across from me. "I'm more interested in Kens than Kennedys."

I laughed. "Well, I could probably use a good friend here, that's for sure."

My eyes moved back to Mr. Personality's table. He looked my way once more—and guess who didn't look away again? Good ole creepy me. He blinked a few times before turning back to staring at the menu. I felt my cheeks instantly heat as I lifted my glass of orange juice to my lips, and Marty followed my stare.

He snickered. "Most people look at Jax Kilter that way," he said, making me spit out my juice in an instant, ruining my new plate of food.

"Wait, what?" I exclaimed, completely baffled by Marty's words.

He looked at me as if I were completely insane—and, well, okay, that was a fair judgment—but I still couldn't shake off my nerves.

"Did you say Jax Kilter?" I asked.

"Yeah."

No way.

It couldn't be him…

It had been years since I'd last seen him, and hardly anything about the man in front of me resembled the boy I'd once known—

except for those eyes. Those deep, dark eyes pulled me in the same way they had when we were children.

Marty scratched at his nonexistent beard. “Do you know him?”

“Yes. I mean, I did, I think…a long time ago. Gosh, it’s been years.” My eyes moved back toward Jax, and my heart tightened in my chest as tears welled up in my eyes. Could that really be him? It had to have been over fifteen years since we’d last talked. We were only children back then, yet seeing him now and knowing he was the same Jax from my childhood made my mind fly into a tailspin. For the shortest period of time, he had been my person. My summer camp companion. My best friend. We’d spent two summers growing up together, building a strong connection, right up until he disappeared from my life without a word.

“You know him?” I asked Marty before my teeth chewed into my bottom lip.

“Oh yeah. It’s a small town, so everyone is quick to know everyone. If I’m honest, I already knew everything about you before you sat down—all but your Social Security number,” he joked.

“Is he…nice?” I asked, ignoring the fact that Marty said he knew all about me. I was too concerned with knowing all about Jax. My question seemed idiotic, because based on my interaction with him, I knew the answer: No, he wasn’t nice. Well, he was kind of nice? A little…I thought? From what I’d observed, his actions spoke differently than his words, and I wanted Marty’s input on who Jax had become.

“Jax is…he’s…well, I’m not one to gossip. People already talk enough crap around these parts to give *Days of Our Lives* another decade of episodes, but Jax is an interesting fellow. A bit of a loner, minus his random relationships. He recently got out of a two-year relationship with Amanda Gates—not that they really seemed close. He’s a bit EU.”

“EU?”

“Emotionally unavailable. I’m surprised Amanda stuck around that long with him. His looks don’t hurt. I’m sure that and their bedroom affairs was enough to keep her attention. If I had the smallest indication that he was into Kens over Kennedys, I’d let my Marty wave his way because those eyes will swallow any human whole. But, alas, he plays for your team, not mine.”

I smiled. The more Marty talked, and the more comfortable he became with me, the more I liked him. His personality was

beginning to shine through the clouds of his nerves.

"I heard he's the town jerk," I said.

"He is…but like the good kind."

I laughed. "What does that even mean? The good kind of jerk? That's an oxymoron."

"No, it's not. You know…he's a jerk to the people who deserve it. At first, if he comes off as cold, it's just because he doesn't know someone. He has his shields up high, because he's been hurt a lot. I can't really blame him with the shit people in this town have put him through. I'd tag people as guilty until proven innocent too if I'd lived half the life Jax has lived, and I'm the token gay guy in this place plus I have OCD. Trust me, I've lived a life, but I wouldn't trade it to walk in Jax's shoes for a minute."

My chest tightened at Marty's words. If anything, Jax didn't sound like the jerky villain in this town's story. What it seemed more like was that he was the broken hero, the one who'd fallen apart so much he'd retreated toward the darkness over the light.

Very much like I had after tragedy found me.

"His life has been that bad?" I asked, hopeful that Marty would shake his head and say no.

Sadly, he nodded. "Jax has kind of a dark past. He spent a lot of years keeping to himself while caring for his asshole of a father, up until his father was placed in a hospice center a few weeks ago. Now, if you want to talk about assholes of this town, Cole Kilter was the head B-I-T-C-H. But Jax? Nothing like his father, not in the least, though he does come from asshole genetics."

"What about his mom?"

Marty frowned. "Like I said, he has a dark past."

Those words alone broke my heart. I knew how much his mother meant to him, and the idea that she wasn't around anymore was devastating.

Marty crossed his arms. "Between you and me, I think Jax is the nicest guy in this whole town." He rolled up his shirt and showed me a scar on his skin. "A few years ago, I got jumped by Lars Parker and his group of jerks. They were coming out of a bar drunk when I was finishing setting up the diner for the next day. They started harassing me about making them some free food, and well, long story short, they jumped me.

"News traveled fast about the incident, and a few days later, Lars and his buddies had their own battle wounds, black eyes and

all. I came into work after that, and there Jax was, sitting at his regular booth, reading his paper with both hands bandaged up. He said he had an accident while chopping wood in his back yard. To this day he swears he had nothing to do with kicking Lars' ass, but I have a feeling he had plenty to do with it. Afterward, he told me to let him know if anyone bothered me. I still thank him for it often, and he always tells me to piss off and bring him his order to go."

Lars Parker.

The same jerk from when we were kids. Of course it was that same monster who'd come on to me. I knew I had a strange feeling when I met the guy. I wasn't surprised to see he'd turned out to be the exact jerk he had been on the path to becoming.

Marty headed back to work, and I looked back over at Jax. He shifted around in his booth, and when his head rose up, he turned in my direction. Our eyes locked, and my heart began repeatedly pounding in my chest.

Before I could say anything, Marty brought Jax his to-go bag then he was on his way out of the café, leaving his baseball cap on the table.

I scrambled to leave my money for my bill on the table, and then I hurried over to pick up Jax's baseball cap.

I dashed out of the café to find Jax and give him his hat, and to…I don't know…hug him? Cry? Ask him where he'd been all these years? Yet before I could do any of that, my feet froze in place as I stared forward at a little girl standing in front of the ice cream parlor with her mother. She held a cone filled with a double scoop of mint chocolate chip, and she couldn't seem to lick fast enough to keep it from melting. His mother was rummaging in her purse in search of napkins to help clean up the mess.

I couldn't look away.

The girl looked to be around five years old, maybe six.

All I knew was that she was young, adorable, and alive.

So very much alive.

I can't be here, I thought to myself as my chest began to tighten. I wanted to turn on my heels and go the other direction. I wanted to run. I wanted to run so far away, back to the house, and bury myself in a place where the reminder of my loss wouldn't be presented to me in every way, shape, and form.

Her favorite ice cream was mint chocolate chip.

She'd be talking so much the ice cream would melt down her

fingers and make a massive mess no matter how often I tried to clean it up. I'd always have napkins in my purse because I was her mother, and mothers always have napkins in their purse, and…

Stop it, Kennedy. Go home.

But I couldn't move. I was frozen in place as a panic attack began to sweep across my soul. I couldn't look away from the child and the mother who was wiping the mess from her chin. I couldn't turn away. I couldn't breathe.

"What's wrong with you?" a voice asked, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I turned to see Jax standing there with a perplexed look in his eyes. My body was trembling as my hands shook with his hat in my grip, and I parted my lips to speak, but no words left my throat.

I saw it in his eyes, too—the way he looked at me as if I were insane, the same way Penn had stared my way for the past year. He was judging me. He was baffled by my moment of unexplainable fear. He was…

Helping me?

"Walk," he ordered, nodding once.

"I…I-I can't," I pushed out, still trembling. The little girl and her mother were no longer in front of me, but the shadows of their moment of love intermixed with the shadows of my own past in my mind. I was overthinking, overdoing, and over-feeling every single emotion that was hammering at my heart.

I couldn't stop it, though. It was why I did my best to unplug from society. It held too many reminders of all the joy I'd lost.

"You can," he disagreed. "You can walk."

He didn't understand.

No one understood.

His arm slid under mine, and he looped it with his own.

"Wh-what are you do-doing?" I stuttered, my voice hoarse.

"This," he explained, stepping forward and taking me with him. "Now you do it."

"Please, no, I ca—"

"Stop it. Stop saying what you can't do when you can do it. Mind over matter. Come on, Sun…" His voice was low but nowhere near as cold as it'd been before. The nickname I hadn't heard in so long hit me like a freight train. He knew. He knew it was me. He remembered. "Walk with me," he begged.

One step.

Then another.

I was moving. That, or he was lifting me up and making me float down the sidewalk. Either way, he walked me all the way back to my house in complete silence as my heartbeats began to come down to a much tamer speed. I felt everyone's eyes on Jax and me as we walked, and I hated it. I hated the embarrassment that came with the panic attacks, the way people stared as if I were a nutjob.

I remembered my first panic attack in a public place. It was at Penn's real estate agency's annual Christmas party. I had a full-blown meltdown while the speakers blasted my baby girl's favorite holiday song, "This Christmas" by Donny Hathaway. I was mid-conversation with his boss when my knees buckled from beneath me and I hit the ground in a warp of panic.

He was humiliated to call me his wife after that.

I could only imagine how Jax felt walking me home in this moment. What was worse was he wasn't even married to me. He was a complete and utter stranger dealing with the looks of the whole town. He didn't seem bothered by it at all, though. He just kept walking with his arm linked with mine.

When we arrived at the house, I thanked him, and he shushed me and told me to sit down on the front step.

"I'm really okay," I said, still feeling a bit shaky and lightheaded.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes before releasing his sigh. "*Please,*" he urged. "Sit down."

Even though I wanted to argue, I decided to pick my battles. I sat, and to my surprise, he took a seat beside me. I didn't know what to say to him, but thankfully, Jax wasn't looking for words. He simply sat next to me in a complete silence that felt…comforting? Yes. I felt so much more comfortable than I had when I was walking into town, all because Jax was on that front porch step.

It turned out you didn't need words to bring you comfort. Sometimes, all you needed was for someone to sit beside you in the middle of your panicked storms.

When the time came for him to leave, he rose to his feet and glanced down at me. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I am. Thank you for helping me." I paused. "How long? How long did you know I was…me?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "A few days. I saw your family car sitting in the driveway."

“I… This…it’s crazy, right? After all these years, for us to meet up like this… I’m just trying to understand what it all means, how it all—”

“Nothing. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

I placed my hand against my chest and breathed in deeply. “But it could, right? It could mean something. I mean it almost feels like kismet, right? Of all the towns I could’ve ended up in, I ended up here. You feel it, don’t you? You feel how this feels…I don’t know… it’s just a feeling in my chest. What if—”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t try to make this something it’s not. Truthfully, we should probably keep our distance. To keep the past in the past.”

I stayed quiet because, I didn’t know what to say. To be honest, I felt a little crazy. My mind was still spinning from my panic attack, and my heart rate was too high to decide if I wanted to hug Jax or yell at him for disappearing all those years ago. Before I could do anything, he was already walking away, leaving me alone with all of the thoughts and questions shooting through my brain.

After Jax left, I headed straight into the house with an overwhelming urgency. I rushed toward my bedroom, straight for a box I had yet to unpack. Ripping the tape from it, I tossed items out of the way until I came upon a golden treasure box. In that box was where I kept all my most precious items. Mama’s jewelry. Daddy’s favorite ties. Daisy’s drawings. Old photographs. And letters from Jax.

Letters he’d written to me so long ago. Letters I’d kept safely locked away throughout the years. I hadn’t read his words in the longest time, but now my heart was pounding wildly in my chest as I reached into the box and unfolded the notes to read the words ten-year-old Jax had written to me.

His words were scribbled across the pages in black ink, and I smiled at how he was always able to stay within the lines—the complete opposite of how I used to write my notes. While my handwriting was messy, Jax’s was always tame.

I collected the pieces of paper and headed out to the convertible to sit under the sun while I read the words from the man who once was my best friend.

I didn’t expect to get so emotional while reading them. I didn’t expect tears to form in my eyes as my stare dashed back and forth

on the pages. We'd written each other for three years straight during the months we weren't spending at summer camp together. We'd stayed in touch the best way we knew how. I remembered spending three years rushing out to the mailbox, hoping to see Jax's perfect penmanship on an envelope.

I swore I had probably read those letters a million times back in the day. The edges of the pages were tattered and worn, but that didn't take away from the odd set of butterflies that found their way to me. It was from little things that had probably felt so minor back then when I read them.

Words like:

I miss you.

If you need anything, let me know.

See you later.

They were all so simple, not holding a big meaning to them at all, but at that moment in time, I felt as if they meant the world to me—especially see you later. There had been a day and a time when I thought I'd never see Jax again, yet now here we were. Later had finally found its way to us both.

My finger rolled across the envelope with Jax's address on it. My eyes focused on the word Havenbarrow in his address, and goose bumps filled me up. I had been just a kid so I hadn't known how to track him down, but he'd been right here this whole time, a forty-five-minute drive away. I supposed my mind hadn't held on to the name of the town all these years since I hadn't known where it was, so I hadn't recognized it when Yoana surprised me with the house here. To my young self, it might as well have been across the world.

I read one of the last letters he'd written to me, and one paragraph stood out to me more than any others.

I know there's no reason for me to say this because your parents are awesome, but you say it to me in every letter you've written to me about my dad, so I figured I should say it back, just in case there's ever a day you need to hear it.

If you need to run away, run away to me.

-Jax

The tears I'd been fighting finally began to fall from my eyes. Even through all my hurting, I still believed in many things, and destiny was at the top of that list. There had to be a reason I had been brought to the town where my former best friend lived. Not only

did he live in Havenbarrow, but we also crashed into each other in the woods. It had to be a sign of something. It had to hold meaning in some way, shape, or form.

Perhaps I was wishing and hoping for it to mean something even though it didn't. Maybe my spirit needed a bit of magic in it after a year of holding so much darkness.

I wished for a miracle, and around the corner was Jax Kilter.

Still, I didn't know what it meant. I just needed it to mean something. Anything, really. I needed something to feel hopeful after a year of feeling the complete opposite.

Just then, my phone dinged, and a message appeared.

Penn: There's a big gala happening this weekend, and I don't want to have to explain why my wife isn't there. You can come home now. I overreacted. We'll figure our shit out.

Penn: Fuck, Kennedy. Please. I need you. I miss you.

I miss you.

Those words didn't give me butterflies the way they had in Jax's letter.

They felt forced—controlling, almost, as if he only said them to get his way. I knew the only reason he said that was because he was feeling the strain of having to explain to his friends and colleagues why I hadn't been attending events. He worked so hard to keep up the appearance that he and I lived the perfect life, that we were the happily ever after others dreamed of. I would have bet he was having panic attacks trying to sugarcoat the fact that his wife had left his side.

Good.

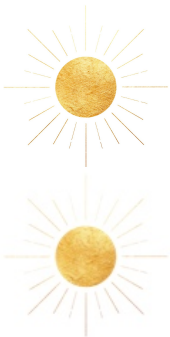
It was about time he knew what panic attacks feel like.

Regardless, his kind, gentle text messages didn't erase the nasty words he'd said to me the night he pushed me to leave his side. I knew better than to fall into the false narrative of emotions he'd randomly text my way.

I went back to reading my letters from Jax. They held much more authenticity within the words.

My mind couldn't help but wonder about Jax and who he'd become throughout the years. I couldn't help but wonder how many parts of the young boy I'd once loved still lived within his heart.

11



Kennedy
Eleven years old
Year one of summer camp

Jax Kilter was so handsome.

It was a weird kind of handsome that a lot of people didn't find handsome, but I did because I thought all things that were different were handsome and beautiful. I liked his dark brown eyes that looked like my favorite chocolate bar, the big ears he hadn't grown into yet. I liked how his nose bent a little to the left as though it was made to do that. I liked his big glasses. He looked imperfect in so many ways, and I liked that about him.

Mama said the best people are the imperfect ones because the best adventures in life don't come from perfect things.

I liked Jax's facial hair, too, even though he didn't have any facial hair yet. I knew one day if he did grow facial hair, I'd like it on him. I'd have bet he was going to be a handsome man because he was already a handsome boy.

I liked Jax Kilter so much for so many reasons, but one of the biggest reasons was because he didn't fit in with anyone else at camp, and I didn't fit in with anyone at camp because I talked a lot and was kind of different and *ohmygosh* maybe we could be friends!

I didn't wake him up yet, because I knew once I woke him up, he might run and never want to talk to me again. I'd had a lot of friends who stopped talking to me after our first hangout session because they thought I was a weirdo.

Mama and Daddy told me being weird was a good thing, though. If a person was weird, that meant they had flavor, and I didn't want my life to be bland. I had so many big, colorful dreams and I didn't ever want to lose my way on achieving them because I gave up my weirdness.

The best quality about me—other than my ability to burp the ABCs—was that I was so comfortably weird.

I swallowed hard as I watched the sun start to rise outside and then I nudged Jax in the arm. "Hey," I whispered. "It's time to get up."

Jax stirred and grumbled and stirred some more. "Five more minutes, Ma."

I smiled, because he was funny when he was dreaming. I nudged him again. "I'm not your mother, Jax Kilter. Get your butt up before you're caught in bed with Kennedy Lost."

That got him to open his eyes—real wide. Those wide, delicious chocolate eyes.

He looked at me then around at my sleeping bunkmates and shot up from lying down. "I gotta get out of here before anyone notices."

"Yeah, that's why I woke you, duh."

He stood and brushed his hand under his crooked nose as he picked up his wet clothes from the night before.

I stood, too, and smiled big at him. Mama always said smiling makes other people feel like smiling, too. "*Smiles are contagious, Kennedy. Spread yours like a wildfire*," she'd always said. So, there I was, in front of Jax, cheesing harder than I'd ever cheesed before.

He arched an eyebrow and brushed his hand through his messy hair. "What are you doing?"

"Smiling."

"Why?"

"So you'll smile, too."

He blinked. "Oh."

I tossed on my pink hoodie and slid my feet into my sneakers. "If you want, you can come talk to the birds with me."

"Birds don't talk."

“Yes, they do. You’re just not listening closely enough.”

“You’re so weird, Kennedy.”

I smiled bigger. “Thanks, Jax.” I scrunched up my nose. “Hey, is your name just Jax or is it longer?”

“It’s Jaxson, but only my mom calls me that.”

“Jaxson,” I sang. “Oh, I like that more. I like calling people by their longer name. Like Matthew, or Nicholas, or Samantha. My dad’s name is Tim, but Mama calls him Timothy. She said longer names are sosipcated.”

“You mean sophisticated,” he corrected.

I narrowed my eyes. “Say it again, but slow.”

“So—phis—ti—ca—ted,” he dragged out.

“So—phis—ti—ca—ted,” I echoed, smiling big at him. “Thanks. Sometimes I talk so fast I get tongue-tied and my words come out wrong, and other times I just don’t know the right words, and it’s helpful when someone is around to give me the words I meant, so thank you.” I took a deep breath. “Hey, can I call you Jaxson?”

“No!” he barked, a wrinkle forming on his forehead. “I told you —only my mom calls me that.”

“Wow.” I shook my head. “Your mom is so lucky. So, do you want to?”

“Want to what?”

“Go talk to the birds?”

“Does your mind always do that?”

“Do what?”

“Think a million thoughts at once.”

“Oh.” I scrunched my nose and wiggled my lips. “Yeah, I think so. Well, okay, I’d love to stick around and talk, but if I don’t get out there, I’ll miss the birds, and I don’t know if they’d know what to do without my morning conversation. Bye, Jax! See ya around, buckaroo!”

I tossed on my backpack, which was packed with goodies for any adventures I might wander into throughout the day. I had Nutri-Grain bars, bubbles, and a bottle of water. Whenever my parents, my sister, and I went on adventures back home, Mama would always pack the Nutri-Grain bars, and Daddy would have big jugs of water for us to sip from.

I left Jax in my cabin as I headed out to go sing to the birds. I loved being at camp because we were right in the middle of the woods. The girls’ cabins sat in a nice clearing in the forest, with

lilac bushes planted right outside the door. When the wind blew, you'd be hit with the scent of flowers, which I loved the most. Lilacs were Mama's favorite flower, and smelling them each morning when I walked outside made me a little less homesick. The air still smelled like rain, and I made sure to puddle-jump each time I saw a pool of water as I whistled and wandered through the woods.

Each day, I shared a bread roll I'd taken from the previous night's dinner to feed to the birds, and boy, did they love it. They'd scoop and dive for the treat while I sat on a log and listened to their beautiful songs.

As I sat down upon my log and went digging through my backpack, I began my conversation with the birds then was quickly interrupted by the sound of a boy clearing his throat.

I turned around to see Jax standing there in his pajamas with his clothes from yesterday folded perfectly in his arms.

I smiled, and this time, my smile was enough to get him to smile, too. I went digging in my backpack again and pulled out a strawberry Nutri-Grain bar. It was my last strawberry one, which was my favorite, but I held it out toward Jax. "Want one?"

He hesitated for a second and looked around the campground as if he was worried about someone catching him hanging out with a weirdo like me. Then he took a breath and walked toward me. He took the bar from my hand and looked up at the trees, gazing at the birds.

"What kind are out here?" he asked as he unwrapped his bar and took a very small bite from it.

"Oh, you know. There's the red-eyed lonnie, and the grayed jasper, and the eriken," I said matter-of-factly.

Jax looked at me with a raised brow and confusion in his eyes. "Did you just make all of that up?"

"Yup."

"Of course you did."

We began eating our bars and talking to the birds. Well, I talked while Jax kind of just mumbled to himself. As the sun began to come all the way up, Jaxson took a swig from a water bottle I'd given him. "Is your full name Kennedy?"

"Yup. It means helmeted chief. Dad said it means I'll be a leader and protected from bad things. My older sister's name is Yoana, which means God is gracious, which fits her because she's pretty awesome." I tilted my head. "What does your name mean?"

“Oh, it’s stupid.”

“I doubt that—no name meaning is stupid.”

“Mine is, trust me.”

“Just tell me already.”

He grumbled and sighed. “Jaxson means son of Jack.”

“Oh.” I nodded in understanding. “Is your dad’s name Jack?”

“No. It’s Cole.”

“Hm. Yeah, you’re right—that is a stupid name meaning. Let’s make up our own for you. How about…Jaxson means hero. That way you’re strong and can always save people no matter what.”

“You can’t just make up name meanings, Kennedy.”

“Sure I can. That’s what all the old people did when they decided yours meant son of Jack.”

He folded his arms for a minute in deep thought and then shrugged. “Okay, Jaxson means hero even though I don’t think I’ll ever be able to save anyone.”

“Give it time. You have to grow into your name, as my dad always says. Chin up—you’ll get there.”

“Yeah, okay.” He scratched at the back of his neck. “By the way, thanks for helping me last night.”

“No problem.” I stuffed the last piece of my bar into my mouth and wiped my hands on my pajamas pants. “So, tell me something exciting about yourself.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“You know, something cool about you.”

“Oh. There’s nothing cool about me.”

I started laughing and shoved him in the shoulder. “You’re so funny, Jax.”

“I wasn’t kidding. I’m not a cool person.”

“Everyone’s a cool person. Even the uncool people.”

“Kennedy, that doesn’t even make sense.”

“You don’t always have to make sense. Tell me something. What’s something you like?”

He cleared his throat and brushed his thumb down the bridge of his nose before pushing his glasses up. “I guess I like big words that mean different things. My mom and I are always searching for big words to show each other and to learn the meanings of. We even made a Pinterest board to tag our favorite big words.” He wiggled his nose. “It’s kind of stupid.”

I gasped and clapped my hands together. “It’s not stupid! No

way! Big words are so cool! I don't know many big words other than so—phis—ti—ca—ted, so maybe you can teach me."

For a moment, his eyes lit up. "Are you serious?"

I nodded. "Yup."

"Well…what kind of words do you want to know?"

"I don't know because I don't know them, silly. How can I know what I want to know if I don't know them?"

He laughed nervously, and at that moment he became even more handsome. "Oh. Right."

"Just tell me your favorite."

"Oh gosh, there are so many." He was beginning to talk more and more, and I liked that about him. I liked how he started to open up to me. "Like, clinomania!"

I gasped and clapped my hands together. "Oh! I love it!"

"You don't know what that means, do you?"

"Not at all!"

He laughed again. "It means a strong desire to stay in bed. My mom has clinomania after every weekend when she has too much wine."

"It sounds like your mom and my mama would be best friends. What's another one?"

"There's solivagant."

"Oh, yes, yes. Solivagant. Very nice. That's also one of my favorite words now."

He smirked. "It means someone who wanders alone. Kind of like me. I keep to myself a lot."

"I do, too. Most people think I'm too weird to be friends with, so I'm a solivagant, I guess." I frowned a little, thinking about how sometimes when I wandered, I got lonely without my family around.

"Not right now, though," he said, nudging me. "Because you're not wandering alone. You're with me."

My lips turned up. "Yeah. I'm with you."

He kept telling me different words, and I kept listening. His mumbles were getting a bit louder, to the point that they weren't mumbles at all, and then when he'd laugh loud enough, I swore every bird would dance to his sound.

"Hey, Jax?"

"Yes, Kennedy?"

"You want to be my best friend?"

He scrunched up his nose. “You don’t just ask people to be your best friend. That’s not how people get best friends.”

“Oh.” I frowned and scratched at my tangled hair. “Well, how do people get best friends?”

“I don’t know. It just kind of happens.”

“Oh.” I pulled out my roll and began feeding the birds as they dived down like addicts. “Hey, Jax?”

“Yes, Kennedy?”

“Do you just kind of want to happen to be best friends?”

He sighed. “Okay, Kennedy.”

My cheeks heated up and I looked down at the birds chewing up the rolls. “I always wanted a best friend.”

I couldn’t hear him too clearly, because Jax Kilter liked to mumble, but I thought he said the words, “Me too.”

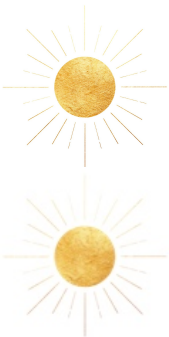
“Now we can be solivagants together,” I said.

“Uh, that cancels out the whole point of solivagant.”

“Shh, Jax. Just let this happen.”

He smiled, and muttered, “Okay.”

12



Kennedy
Present day

Rain, rain, go away, please take Kennedy's anxiety away.

It rained for two more days, and my body was aching from no sleep. When I tried to close my eyes, I'd see flashes of my past within my eyelids. If I did fall asleep, I'd have nightmares.

Nothing was working. I'd tried every sleeping pill known to mankind. I'd done almost every sleep meditation on the internet, saged my house, taken bubble baths, watched *The Office* ten times over, and still, nothing.

The pounding of the rain on the house was growing more and more intense with each passing day. I had officially been living on Chinese food takeout and pizza delivery. Not my proudest truths, but it was where I was in my journey. On top of the rain, I hadn't left the house since my panic attack. Honestly, my body had been going through waves of emotional exhaustion. When I'd awaken from my nightmares, I'd be stuck alone with my own hellish thoughts.

I hadn't known minds could grow so overwhelmed that they could focus on a million things all at once, but mine had managed to do it. Currently, my thoughts consisted of: *What am I going to do*

for a real job? Will I stay in Havenbarrow or move back to the city? Where is Penn? Does he really miss me, or is he just lonely? If he does miss me, why hasn't he come looking for me?

Because he doesn't know where you are, Kennedy.

If he really cared, wouldn't he try to track me down? Wouldn't he call me instead of just texting?

I also wondered what Jax was up to during the storms. Had he really meant he didn't want to reconnect? It was hard for me to believe that. I still had so many questions, like how had he bulked up so much from being the skinny boy he was? Why had he stopped writing me? And, most importantly, what had happened to his mother?

Every time I spoke to Yoana, the worry in her voice grew stronger. I sometimes wished she wasn't so good at reading me—even through a cell phone speaker—but my sister knew the heaviness in my soul was so hard to handle some days.

"I'm okay," I kept promising her. I felt bad for promising lies, but she was halfway around the world—so there was nothing she could do for me to make everything better. My anxiety and sadness needed to be dealt with by me and only me. No one else could save me.

Well, no one except maybe Joy Jones.

As I was stuck in my house, wandering back and forth in my dining room anticipating yet another night of failed sleep, I heard a tapping at my window. I looked up and saw Joy standing there, throwing something in my direction. She was reaching out of her fully opened window, tossing things in my direction to get my attention while allowing her arm to get extremely soaked.

Uncertain what she was doing, I went and opened my window. "Hi," I said hesitantly, raising an eyebrow. "Are you okay?" I knew she was in her late eighties, and if there was something to be alarmed about, I wanted to help her the best I could. I knew I wasn't the most stable person, but if I could somehow build up enough courage to help another, I was all over that idea.

"Hi, sweetheart, yes. I just wanted to see if you'd like to come over for a cup of tea," she sweetly replied.

"Um, it's past ten at night, Joy."

Her smile spread, and she nodded once. "So wine?"

I laughed and agreed. What else was I going to do? Sit and overthink everything for the remainder of the night? I tossed on a

raincoat and boots. When I opened my front door and saw the downfall of rain along with the lightning striking above, my chest tightened with nerves.

Just walk, Kennedy. It's right next door.

But I can't move.

The more the sky cried, the more tightness gathered in my chest as the sense of panic began building. I should've been better at this. I should've been able to walk forward without concern. But flashes of the night from the accident swirled in my mind, and I hadn't been able to push them away.

I can't do it, I thought to myself, closing my eyes from embarrassment, from shame.

"Yes, you can," a voice called out. I turned to my left to see Joy smiling my way with the most sincere look. "Come on now, you're not alone. Just a few steps, and your glass of wine awaits."

"I… My…" I shut my eyes and inhaled deeply. My hands were beginning to tremble as the fear began filling me up inside.

"It's okay to be afraid, sweetheart," Joy commented. "You can be afraid and brave all at the same time. Now, come on. The wine is chilled, and the company is good. Even if you have to hold your breath and dash over here, do it. Then we can breathe together."

I did as she said. I held my breath and dashed across the yard, wrapping around the sidewalk and sprinting up her footpath. The moment I made it up to her front porch, I ran into her house without being invited in, like a crazed lunatic.

I shivered in her foyer, shaking off the rain, and Joy followed me inside, handing me a towel she already had waiting. "There we are." She smiled. "That wasn't so bad."

If only she knew the speed of my pounding heart. It had been a lot harder than it seemed.

"White or red?" she asked.

"Um, white if you have it."

"Oh, honey, I have everything. Now, come on, sit down on the sofa and make yourself comfortable. I made a little charcuterie board for us to snack on while we chat. It's right there on the table if you want to pick at it."

"Thanks, Joy."

I took a seat on her sofa and tried to tame my still-elevated heart rate. Her house was very much a home in that everything felt authentic and important. The walls were covered with mismatched

frames displaying black and white pictures that highlighted all the beautiful moments in her life. Plus, all of her furniture was vibrant, and there was no shortage of light because different lamps both short and tall were scattered around.

There was a wall of art pieces that were spotlighted and so beautiful. There were paintings and sculptures that radiated such warmth. It was as if I were in a museum looking at masterpieces. Simply breathtaking.

When Joy came back, she had the biggest wine glasses I'd ever seen in my life, and within a split second, she was officially my new best friend. Each glass had to hold at least half a bottle of wine on its own.

I smiled, pleased. "That's a very impressive glass."

She handed it over to me. "Some nights call for bigger glasses."

Hear, hear.

"How did you know I needed a break for wine?" I joked, sipping at probably the best glass of white wine I'd ever had in my life.

"I've noticed you pacing back and forth the past few nights. Not that I was spying or anything, but my reading nook is right across from your dining room. I figured you couldn't sleep during storms."

"They shake me up a little," I confessed, seeing no reason to lie about it. "So, thank you. I really appreciate the company. I have to admit, I was going a little stir crazy and on the verge losing my mind."

"Hmm." She nodded in understanding. "It's like that sometimes. Storms can feel like they last forever, but from my experience, I've learned that no matter what, they always pass."

That was a nice thought that I'd have to remember.

"You know what's nice to know?" she asked.

"What's that?"

"Even behind the rain clouds, the sun is always there."

"That is a nice thought," I said. "It's just sometimes hard to remember."

She patted my knee. "Trust me, I know. I'm almost ninety, and sometimes I forget, too. Then again, I guess that's why there's wine." She shifted around on the cushion. "So, Jax seems to be drawn to you."

I puffed out a laugh. "Drawn to me? Not in the least. He actually made it clear that we should keep our distance from each other."

"Oh, sweetheart"—she waved me off—"Jax didn't mean that.

He's just hardheaded like my Stanley was. Showing emotions is hard for Jax. He doesn't come by them all too often, either. I'd been sharing a drink with that boy for many years now, and he still hardly opens up. He acts tough, like a brick wall, but he's goo, just a big softy. And ever since you've come to town, I've seen the way he looks at you."

My stomach filled with nerves. "How does he look at me?"

"As if you're something he wants to know more about."

I lowered my head and fiddled with my fingers. "Years ago, he was my best friend. We went to summer camp together for two years, and we wrote letters back and forth to one another for about three years. Then, one day, his letters stopped coming. He just… disappeared."

Joy's eyes widened with surprise. "You knew him as a boy?"

"Yes. He was…" I smiled, thinking back on Jax as a kid. "He was the kindest boy I'd ever known. The quietest boy but the kindest."

"Yes. Those facts haven't changed over the years. And he knows? That you're…you?"

"He does, but he told me it would be best if we don't dive deeper into our history."

"Oh horseshit," Joy groaned, making me burst into laughter. "You can't listen to a dang thing Jax says—you know why?"

"Why is that?"

"His heartbeats are set to self-destruct. He pushes good things away because he doesn't think he deserves them, but I know that boy—probably better than he knows himself—and he needs a friend. I think he needs you more than he'll ever admit."

I shook my head as I took a sip of wine. "I doubt he wants me to be that friend. Plus, like you said, he's a brick wall. I have no way of getting through to him."

"Sure you do." She placed her wine glass down and walked over to her fireplace, where a few candles were sitting. She picked up a lighter and began lighting each one. "You've lost someone, no?"

I stood straighter. Even with all the gossiping people, I hadn't told a soul about my daughter. "I…I'm sorry? What do you mean? How do you…?"

She looked back to me and smiled. "I see it in your eyes, and I see their light around you."

Chills began spreading over my body as the words left her lips. "I… It…" My mouth grew dry as I tried to form the words, and she

shook her head.

"No, no, sweetheart. You don't have to talk about it if it's too hard. I get it, but I want you to know you aren't alone in your loss. If there is anything in this world that unites us all, it's life and death, day and night. Jax went through a tragedy, too, and since you two have history, I figure perhaps you two can connect on some level again."

"I don't think he wants me in his life, not very much at least."

"I bet he does. Jax's father is currently reaching the end of his life, too, and I know that's eating at him even though he won't talk about it. Now, I'm not telling you this so you'll force yourself onto him. I just think healing comes with time, patience, and friends, and I believe the two of you could both use a friend right now," Joy explained.

"How do I get him to want to be my friend? How do I get him to open up to me?"

"Just be you. That's good enough, I'm sure. If all else fails, push him. Sometimes in life we need to be pushed to be reminded that we can still move."

I thought back to just a few days earlier, when my panic attack hit me straight on, and I was unable to move forward. There Jax was, pushing me, helping guide me back to my home. If he could help me, I could at least try to do the same for him. What was the worst that could happen?

Joy and I finished our wine and talked about life. She made me laugh when I would've otherwise been at home dealing with my own thoughts and sadness. I was so thankful for her kindness. She was one of the first people in town who felt genuinely interested in becoming my friend.

When I asked why she hadn't left her house for so long, she replied with the simplest answer: "I go where the love is. This place is filled with my loved ones' heartbeats. When love goes somewhere else, I'll be sure to follow. This is my haven until God tells me otherwise."

As I stood to leave, I stopped in her hallway, which was lined with photographs. I took in the smiling faces, which made me smile, too. "Is that your husband?" I asked.

"Yes, that's Stanley, my stone-cold sweetheart."

"And the girl?"

"My Bethany. She passed away early in life. We had eighteen

great years with one another before the cancer took her away from us."

My chest tightened. "I'm so sorry." I wanted to hug her, and wanted to cry, but instead, I just stood still.

"I'm sorry, too, Kennedy. I truly am."

I hadn't told her, but somehow Joy knew of my loss. I put on my coat and boots then stepped onto her front porch. We exchanged goodbyes, but before I could leave, I turned back to her, asking the question I'd been trying to answer for some time now. "How do you get over losing a daughter?"

She walked over to me and crossed her arms. "You don't get over it. You just get through it, and you count your blessings for any amount of time you had together. Me personally? I like to believe that once Bethany left my side, she became the wind. Therefore I feel her everywhere." She held her hand out and closed her eyes as she took in a deep inhalation. "Even during the storms."

I smiled her way before pulling her into a tight hug. I thanked her for everything she'd given to me that night and then hurried back over to my front porch. This time, though, before rushing inside, I closed my eyes, and I felt the wind as it danced across my soul.

13

Jax

“He was somewhat lucid today,” Amanda said as I stopped by the reception desk to sign in for my visit with my father. “He remembered my name.”

“Did he give you a hard time?” I asked.

“Would he be Cole Kilter if he didn’t?”

Fair.

“He say anything about me?” I grumbled.

“Kind of called you an asshole.”

Also fair.

I wasn’t sure I was up for a visit that evening after a shitty day at work, but I knew I’d kick myself if I didn’t read him a few chapters. Still, that didn’t change the fact that I was feeling burned out. I hadn’t been feeling well for a few days. Truthfully, all the rain had been a buzzkill, my job sucked, and I couldn’t keep Kennedy off my mind. It was as if me realizing who she was had unleashed a whirlpool of memories I hadn’t figured out how to deal with. I was drowning in memories of her.

A part of me wanted to talk to her. To run into her in town and ask her how she’d been. That part of me was stupid. Almost everything I touched turned to shit, and the thought of reconnecting with Kennedy only to have things go wrong wasn’t a risk I wanted

to take.

We had our past. We had our story.

I just wondered why the hell she'd never written me back.

"How are you handling everything?" Amanda asked, snapping me out of my thoughts about a woman who wasn't her. I felt guilty about it, too. In the past week, I'd thought about Kennedy a million times more than Amanda even though our breakup was pretty recent.

"I'm okay," I dryly replied. "Have a good night."

"Jax, wait." She reached out and grabbed my forearm, and I didn't want to deal with her tonight. Hell, I didn't want to deal with anything. "You don't have to put on a strong act about your father. I know he's the devil, but it's okay if you're hurting. You can talk to me if you need to."

"Nothing to talk about. I'm fine."

"You're lying."

I swallowed hard and looked down. "Amanda?"

"Yes?"

"Let me go." I meant both my arm and me.

She dropped it. "Fine. Be stubborn. I don't know why you live in this world where you think you have to struggle all on your own. Even if you don't talk to me, I hope you talk to someone."

"That's what therapy's for," I muttered.

If only I'd been going.

I pulled out the novel from my jacket, hoping Dad wasn't too lucid when I got to him. How fucked up was that? I prayed to a God I didn't believe in that my father's memory was so far gone he wouldn't remember me.

I walked into his room where he was sitting in a wheelchair, facing the window. Nightfall had already come, so he couldn't have been looking at anything too exciting. I cleared my throat and walked over to him, not sure what I was going to get. He peered up at me with his blue eyes that matched the sea, and he blinked. The right side of his body was paralyzed, and his mouth hung limp as he gazed my way. The blank stare he gave me made it clear he didn't recognize me.

I cleared my throat. "Hey, Mr. Kilter. I wanted to stop by to see if you'd like me to read you some chapters from this novel."

He slightly nodded, and I wheeled him around to face me before I sat down in the chair in front of him. He looked so broken down,

and every now and again, I'd have to wipe his face. It was tough seeing him that way, knowing his outer appearance was nothing compared to what was going on inside his body.

Nobody ever wants to watch their parent's body shut down as years go by. It felt as if it was life's curse—watching those who brought you into the world fall apart, a simple reminder that life is much shorter than any of us imagine.

As I read him the chapters, he stared forward. He wasn't looking at me, exactly, but almost as if he was looking through me. Halfway through my third chapter, I noticed his lips move.

"Go-oo-od," he mumbled, making me raise an eyebrow. Ironic how he mumbled after years of trying to beat the mumbles out of me. Life was a damn joke that way.

"Good?" I asked.

He nodded, barely moving.

My cold heart tried to beat for the poor man.

Then I noticed a small puddle of liquid forming on the floor beneath him. I rose to my feet, realizing he'd wet his pants. I hurried to get someone to assist him. Two nurses came in to help get him cleaned up and into the bed while I held the book tight in my grip.

After he was put to bed, he fell asleep quickly, and I headed out, walking straight past Amanda, who I could feel was staring my way.

I slid into my truck and tossed the book into the passenger seat. After I turned the key in the ignition, I paused. My hands rested on the steering wheel, gripping the leather until my knuckles turned white. I stayed there for a few moments, taking in all the silence that came crashing into me.

I pulled out my phone and called my brother. The conversation went as expected. *"He's not your responsibility, Jax. You should leave that town and start a new life. You aren't to blame for Mom's death."* Wash, rinse, repeat.

As I drove home, I thought about my father, about the man he used to be, the man he'd become. They seemed like two completely different creatures. One terrified me; the other I pitied. No man should be placed in the position where he soils himself and can't do a damn thing about it.

My heart didn't reserve pity for the man my father used to be. Fuck that man and the way he'd harmed me both physically and

emotionally. Fuck the years in therapy that hardly led to healing. Fuck his hands that had punched me, bruised me, belittled me.

Fuck who my father used to be.

Also fuck who he was that evening.

Fuck the man who made my cold heart try to break. My heart couldn't break any more because it'd been shattered too much throughout the years.

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* * *

When I arrived home, I went out to the woods to clear my head. There were too many thoughts going through my mind to go straight to bed. I was tired, but I knew there was no way I'd be able to sleep.

As I approached my normal spot, I paused, seeing a woman sitting there against my bench. The closer I grew, the realization set in on who it was exactly.

"What are you doing here?" I barked, tilting my head in disbelief.

Kennedy looked up and gave me a halfway smile. She had a notebook in her hand that she was scribbling away at before I called out to her.

"Hi," she breathed out. "I um, I just needed some air."

"There's air other places."

"Yes, but this is the most beautiful place I've found yet."

"You're trespassing again," I grumbled, annoyed by her need to break the rules. Secretly kind of relieved to see her. Truthfully I didn't know what I was feeling. After the crappy visit with my father, my emotions were twisted upside down.

"I think we both are going to have to come to grips with the fact that I'm the girl who trespasses."

I grimaced and raked my hand through my hair. How had I wanted her here and wanted her gone all at the same time?

She scooted over on the bench and patted the spot beside her. "You can join me."

"I don't want to talk," I snapped.

"Of course. You've never been much for talking."

"I don't want you to talk, either," I urged.

She frowned. "Well, we both know I have a way of being chatty,

but I can be quiet tonight."

I should've told her to leave, and walked into my home for the night. I should've told her to not come back. I should've told her I never wanted to see her again, because my life was fine without her.

Instead, I sat, because even misery needed company sometimes.

We stayed quiet for a long time. Kennedy kept scribbling away in her notebook, and every now and again, I'd sneak peeks at what she was writing. It was a to do list. Things to see and do in Havenbarrow.

- Meet Marshmallow the cat.
- Black and white movie nights.
- Hidden library.
- Connect with an old friend.
- Tell Jax that it's okay that he's reading my list.
- Ask Jax if he's okay.
- Tell Jax to stop flaring his nostrils because he's realizing I'm writing messages to him.

I groaned, taking my eyes from her notebook. "You're weird."

"I think that was one of your favorite qualities about me."

I stayed quiet.

She kept pushing. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"What happened to no talking?"

"You know I struggle with that."

I shook my head. "I don't know much about you anymore. We were kids back then. A lot has changed."

"Like what?" she questioned.

I looked into her honey-colored eyes and for a moment I didn't want to turn away. I wanted to hug her, too. I wanted to tell her everything that unfolded over the years. I wanted to let her in on the heaviness of my heartaches. I wanted a friend.

I needed a friend, but I didn't deserve one.

"It doesn't matter what's changed," I said. "All that matters is that change has happened."

"Are you okay, Jax?" she asked again, this time her voice coated with the sincerest care and kindness I'd heard in some time.

"It's none of your concern."

"I want it to be, though." She placed a hand against my arm,

and a shot of lightning struck my soul. Her simple touch sent an electric current though my whole system, straight to my heart to try to bring it back to life.

"If you need to talk, Jax," she offered again, and I let her hand linger for a moment because the warmth felt healing.

Why didn't Amanda's touch do that to me?

I pulled my arm away from Kennedy as the cold returned to me. I clasped my hands together and lowered my head as my knuckles turn white. More moments of unspoken words. Then, the mumbles slowly released from my lips.

"My father is dying," I confessed.

"Yes. Joy mentioned that. I'm so sorry, Jax."

"He's an asshole. Or at least he was before all of this."

"And now?"

"Now, he's just there and he has nothing."

"He has you."

"I've never been enough for him before, so I doubt I'd be enough now."

What was I doing? Why was I talking about this? Before she could reach out to send another current through my system, I stood. My brows knotted, I stuffed my hands into my jeans pockets, and I began mentally retreating back to my lonely self.

"You need to stay off my property," I told her. "If you don't, I will get law enforcements involved."

She stood, too. "Moon, I—"

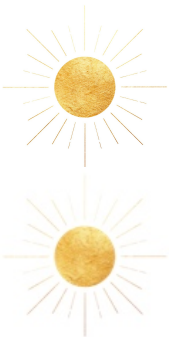
"Don't call me Moon," I snapped. "Leave, Kennedy."

Her shoulders dropped and I tried to not look her way. I couldn't look at her, because if I did I would've begged her not to go.

"I'm sorry. I figured you could've used a friend," she said.

"I don't need a friend," I replied as a faint whisper left me. "I don't need anyone. Remember? Town asshole here. Not interested in making friendship bracelets with you."

14



Kennedy

“No,” I called out as Jax began to walk away.

He turned to face me and tilted his head. “What?”

“I said no. You don’t get to walk away right now.”

“Have you lost your mind?” he barked, his voice coated with anger. Or was it pain? His eyes read pain while his voice screamed annoyance.

“A long time ago, but that’s beside the point. The point is, you need to sit down and come talk to me.”

“I’m not going to,” he ordered. “And if you don’t leave my property now—”

“You’re going to call the cops, yeah, yeah, yeah, yadda, yadda, yadda, I get it, Jax. This is your role in this town. You’re the big bad wolf. The cold, hard man who doesn’t let anyone in, but I know you. The real you. That kind, sensitive boy is still in there. I know you’re not a real asshole.”

“Can you just go back home and pretend we don’t know each other?”

“No, I can’t, because I can tell you’ve been carrying a lot on your shoulders for a long time.”

He turned to me with a look of heaviness in his eyes. A look that

never really leaves his stare. It'd been there since the first day we'd crossed paths in those woods. I could've only imagined how long that pain lived within him.

"I get it," he said. "You feel as if there's some kind of soul connection bullshit between us because we went to camp all those years ago, but that fact is null and void because I am nothing like the kid I was all those years ago."

"And I'm nothing like the girl I was," I agreed.

"Your colorful as fuck wardrobe and your inability to take a hint when conversations are over begs to differ."

I smiled a little and smoothed my hand against my neon yellow sundress. "Okay, I guess some things stayed the same for me."

"Not for me, though. No offense, but I'm not interested in reconnecting with you and trading camp stories over s'mores. I don't have time for any kind of connection in my life—I'm too damn busy. So, if you would please—"

"Kismet," I said, standing up straighter. "You taught me that word. Remember? Along with a million other words. But kismet was my favorite. It meant—"

"I know what it means," he hissed, "but this isn't that. This isn't destiny."

"It could be," I argued. "All I'm saying is…this has to mean something. The universe brought us back together for a reason."

"The universe doesn't control us. I'm sick and tired of this millennial way of thinking. There's no such thing as destiny. If you need a reason for us crossing paths after all these years, here it is: we both lived about an hour outside of our campsite, it's a small fucking world, and people move to different towns. You just so happened to move to my hometown. How's that for your universe theory and divine timing?"

"Not very good, I'll admit."

He looked at me and his mouth twitched, as if he had something to say, but didn't want to share it with me. He shook his head and turned around to head back to his house, and I swallowed hard, thinking back to what Joy told me about Jax's past.

I began following him once more and said the eight words I should've never said. "I heard about what happened to your mother."

Jax's back was to me as his body halted. His shoulders rounded forward and I swore it felt as if time stood still. I didn't know what

to say next. I didn't know how to move forward, but since I'd placed the words out there, I knew I couldn't leave them lingering.

I took a few steps toward him as my next breath caught in my throat. "Jax, I'm so sorry about—"

"Don't," he cut in, making my words falter away. His head shook as he kept his back toward me. "Don't talk about my mother."

Even though his words seemed harsh, I heard the crack in his voice as he spoke. That wasn't anger he was spitting my way—it was pain. An ache I knew too well.

"It was a mistake, Jax. It wasn't your fault."

"You have no clue what was my fault."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to upset you. I just wanted to say I understand what you've been through."

"There's no way you understand what I've been through, Sun," he muttered as the nickname hit me like a ton of bricks. If I were honest, so many of my recent days felt more like the shadows of the moon instead of sunbeams.

"I do," I said, trying my hardest to make him see that he wasn't alone in his misery.

He turned on his heels and his eyes pierced into me with their sadness. Within that moment I felt the weight of the world he'd been carrying around all on his own. "How? How do you understand?"

"Because I'm the reason my parents and daughter died," I blurted out. Those were my nine words. The nine words that burned as they rolled off the tip of my tongue. The nine words I hadn't spoken out loud since—ever. I'd never said those words. Yoana forbid me to speak them, but each day I felt the weight of them. Just because words weren't spoken didn't mean they weren't felt, and those words suffocated me on a daily basis.

Jax's eyes softened as he stood there with complete bafflement at my statement. My nerves shot through the sky, rocketing into the atmosphere, reminding me of how big a person's hurts could be in a single moment.

I lowered my head and fiddled with my fingers, because looking into those brown eyes of confusion was making my heart ache more than it could handle. "There was a bad storm, and I was driving my family to a dinner out. It was right after a fight with my husband. He'd been sleeping around with a coworker and I found out. He

called me delusional, emotional, and unstable. He was the master of gaslighting, making me feel as if I were at fault when I did nothing wrong. He shut down my concerns without even giving me a chance for conversation on the subject. He always did that—turned away from me when I needed his reassurance most. During the storm, he texted me and told me he wanted a divorce. I glanced down at my phone when I got the message, and that was all it took. One split second—one text message, and I hit a slick spot on the road. The car spun and my whole life changed. That was over a year ago, but somedays it feels like mere minutes ago."

He didn't say a word to me, yet he didn't run away either. When the silence became too overpowering, I looked up to find him staring my way, and for the life of me, I couldn't tell what he was thinking. I wondered if Jax ever let anyone close enough to be able to read his thoughts.

His lips parted, but it was as if he couldn't figure out the right words to say. Were there any right words in a situation like that?

He cleared his throat. His brows knitted.

My mouth opened to apologize. It was clear I overshared. It was clear I was making this situation out to be something it wasn't. It was clear that he was going to hug me.

Wait.

What?

He was hugging me.

Jax's body was wrapped around mine as he pulled me in close to him and held on as if he had plans on staying there for the rest of his life. His big, strong arms pooled around my whole frame, and I melted. I melted against his body and his soul. I melted into the history of our yesterdays.

He smelled like cedar and my favorite memories.

I wanted to hold on as long as I could. I wanted to breathe him in more and feel his comfort until I fell asleep that night. I wanted to thank him for giving me a moment to fall apart in his arms, even though I was certain I was supposed to be comforting him, not the other way around.

When it came time to part, he stepped back appearing a bit embarrassed by his sudden embrace. I wiped at my eyes and let out a nervous laugh. "I didn't see that coming."

"Yeah." He smiled, or at least I imagined he did. "Me either."

"I should get out of your hair. I just wanted you to know that if

you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here." I began turning away when he called out to me.

"Kennedy."

I turned back to wait for his next words. It seemed conversation didn't come easy for him. That wasn't new—it never had been easy for him. He cleared his throat once more as he gestured to the space around us. "You can come here whenever you need to clear your head."

My chest tightened from his words. To some, they might've seemed a bit meaningless and cold for the truths I'd shared with him about my parents and my daughter, but from someone like Jax it was much more than that.

He was inviting me to visit his oasis, his safe haven, and it was an invitation I was going to accept.

"Thank you, Jax."

He didn't say a word, but before he turned away from me, the left side of his lips curved up into what was almost a sympathy smile. He raked one hand through his messy hair and sighed. "I'm bad at this."

"Bad at what?"

"Peopling."

I smiled. "You don't say?" I said sarcastically.

His lips turned up into a full blown smile, and my stomach knotted up from the sight.

There he was.

The boy I once knew still lived inside the man of steel.

All I wanted him to do was to come out and play a little longer.

15

Jax
Twelve years old
Year two of summer camp

"And did you know there are like four hundred billion birds in the world? But when Kennedy was telling me about them last summer, she didn't know any names of the birds. That's why I made this for her, to help her learn more about the birds, because I think—"

"Whoa there, slow down, Jaxson. I swear, I've never heard you talk this much before." Mom laughed as she helped me pack my bags for my second year of summer camp. "It makes me happy that you're so excited."

I was excited. I was so, so, *so* excited.

Kennedy and I had been writing each other letters back and forth all school year, and each time I got a letter in the mail, I'd read it five million times. I couldn't wait to see her in person. I couldn't stop thinking about her, and honestly I never stopped thinking about her. Would she look different? Would she be taller? Would she talk as much as she used to? I really hoped she still talked a lot, because even though at first I thought she talked too much, I really liked that she talked too much because it meant I had less talking to do.

I guessed she'd looked the same, only better. I wondered if she

would think I looked the same, too. I had different glasses and was an inch and a half taller based on Mom's markings on the living room wall, but other than that I was the same Jax who'd last seen her. Well, my hair was longer too. I should've cut it.

I wondered if she'd notice anything that'd changed about me.

"I am excited to see her. She's my best friend," I told Mom.

"Hey now," she said, nudging me in the side.

I laughed a little. "You know what I mean. She's my best friend. You're my best mom-friend."

She leaned in and kissed my forehead before folding up another shirt of mine to put in the suitcase. "That works for me. I'll gladly accept the best-mom-friend role. Now, do you want to grab the gift you got for her so we can pack it?"

I hurried over to my dresser where two gifts were wrapped perfectly—and I meant per-fect-ly. I'd wrapped them over and over again until each crease line was smooth. It took me over two hours to get it right, but I didn't care. I wanted it to be exactly right for Kennedy.

I hoped she'd like the bright neon green ribbon. I would never have used neon green ribbon if it was my choice, but I knew it was her favorite color because she was my best friend and I knew those kinds of things about my best friend.

"Do you think she'll like the gifts?" I asked, my heart feeling like it was stuck in my freaking throat. I'd worked on one of the gifts for months, and the idea of Kennedy not liking it kept passing through my mind.

Mom smiled the kind of smile moms do to make their kid feel better. "She's going to love it, Jaxson. Trust me. I'm your best mom-friend, after all—I wouldn't steer you wrong."

The mom smile worked. I instantly felt better.

"Do you think you want to come down to the shop and help me lay out some plans for the houses I'm designing the landscaping for before you leave tomorrow?" Mom asked, closing up my suitcase.

She was trying to open her own landscaping company called Millie's Haven Landscapers. It was Mom's heart and joy, and I couldn't wait until the day she opened up her shop. I loved helping her plan out designs for people. Even though she didn't have a big official business yet, she helped a lot of people around town with their yards. Plus, she was drawing up blueprints for the acres of land we lived on. "Flowers everywhere," she'd always say.

“Wildflowers blooming throughout the year. That’s my dream.”

I didn’t like getting my hands dirty too much, but I did like being her righthand man. She said someday I could even take over the company for her, but I told her there was too much dirt involved.

I didn’t like messes.

I liked things perfectly neat.

“Or he could come fishing with Derek and me,” Dad said as he walked into the doorway of my bedroom. “Do manly things for once in his life.”

I hated fishing.

I hated the idea of the worms.

I hated the idea of the fish flopping side to side.

I hated watching Dad gut them afterward.

But even more so, I hated how Dad always looked disappointed in me when I didn’t want to do the things he was into, like fishing, hunting, and sports.

I liked libraries, and spelling bees, and writing, and Kennedy.

Dad didn’t understand any of those things, which made it hard for him to understand me.

“Landscaping isn’t a woman thing, Cole. The landscaping world is mostly filled with men, and to make Jaxson feel bad about it is disrespectful,” Mom said, backing me up like she always did when it came to Dad being disappointed in me not being more like him.

I guessed that was why she was my best mom-friend. She always had my back.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t get dirty with the job. He doesn’t do any heavy lifting or actual work,” Dad argued. Every time he did this—put me down—my stomach would flip.

Last month, Mom said if he didn’t stop it, she’d leave him, but I didn’t think that was true. She had a way of loving him even when he didn’t deserve to be loved that much.

“Drop it, Cole,” Mom ordered.

He grumbled under his breath and raked his hand through his black hair, which was slowly turning gray. He looked at me for a second before walking out of the room.

I sat up a little, feeling a knot in my throat. “Maybe I should go with him so he’s not mad at me.”

“No. You are your own individual human, Jaxson, and your father doesn’t get to turn you into something you don’t want to be.

If you don't like fishing, that is the end of the conversation."

I lowered my head. "I wish he was nice like you."

She kissed my forehead then gave me a tight hug. "You're perfect the way you are, son. Don't you ever forget that."

The next day, Mom tossed my suitcase into the car, and we headed off to camp.

After I got settled in and Mom cried because she was going to miss me over the coming weeks, we said goodbye, and I grabbed my gift for Kennedy and rushed back to the front of the main hall to wait for her to arrive. I sat on top of a giant rock for what felt like hours. When that yellow car with the markings all over it pulled around, my heart just about jumped out of my chest and ran straight into Kennedy's arms.

When she saw me, she sprinted toward me, shouting my name so loud the aliens on Mars could probably hear her screams. "Jax! Jax! Jaxxxxxxxxxxxx!" she called out, running wildly in my direction with wild arms. Even though she was so embarrassing, and people were staring at us like we were insane, I didn't care. Kennedy did that for me. She helped me not care that much about what other people thought.

She crashed into my arms, and we laughed as we tumbled over to the ground like complete dorks. The more Kennedy laughed, the more I did, too, because she had the kind of laugh that made everyone chuckle along with her.

She pinned me down and straightened my crooked glasses. "You got new glasses!" she exclaimed.

I sighed.

She noticed.

"You have purple hair."

She sighed. "You noticed." She hugged me again.

"I missed you, Sun," I said, hugging her tighter.

She smiled big, which made me smile bigger. "I missed you, too, Moon. I missed you so much I got you a present!"

"I got you one, too!"

We scrambled to our feet, and I handed her my perfectly wrapped gift. She went digging into her backpack and pulled out her perfectly imperfect gift, which was wrapped in newspaper with way too much tape.

"You first!" She nodded as she jumped up and down with glee.

I rushed to rip the paper open and smiled big when I saw what

she'd made me. It was a friendship bracelet with a moon charm on it.

She then held up her arm to show off her matching sun bracelet. "So people will always know we're best friends."

I slid it on really fast and couldn't stop smiling.

"Do you like it?" she asked, biting her bottom lip.

"I love it! I'm never gonna take it off. Now, open yours."

She tore off the wrapping paper, and her eyes got big when she saw the notebook. "A book of birds?" she asked, reading the cover.

"Yeah. I researched a lot of different kinds of birds and wrote all about them. There's over thirty! I even drew pictures of them so we can see what we can find when we go on our hikes. And I have two sets of binoculars in my suitcases if we want see the birds up close and—"

Before I could say anything, Kennedy was crashing into me, laying her lips to mine, and she was…?

Wait.

Is this my…?

Did she just…?

Ohmygoshsheiskissingme!

We were kissing!

Kisssssing!

Jax and Kennedy sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!

Okay, we weren't sitting in a tree, we were standing next to a rock, but it didn't matter because I'd just had my first kiss. My first kiss with my best friend, Kennedy Lost.

I freaking love summer camp!

I didn't know what to do, so I just stood there with my arms at my sides, wondering if this was what it was supposed to feel like. It was as if my heart was going to tear out of my chest and do somersaults on the sidewalk, as if I could run a million laps around the camp and still not be out of breath, as if I was flying. *Am I flying?*

Am I kissing her back?

I couldn't tell. I didn't know how to kiss. My older brother always told me I wouldn't have to even worry about kissing until I was like forty-nine years old, and I was nowhere near forty-nine years old.

She stopped kissing me.

Dang.

Do that again.

I stood there like a dork, unsure what to do. Kennedy stepped back, and her cute cheeks turned red. I didn't remember her cheeks being so cute last summer, but that was the thing about Kennedy Lost, I supposed—she got better and better each year.

"Basorexia," she mumbled. She mumbled! Like me. My heart was still trying to run away.

I narrowed my eyes. "I don't know what that means."

She smiled. "I looked up a lot of words in the last year, and basorexia was one of them. It means a desire to kiss."

Oh.

My new favorite word.

I couldn't form words because I was too busy looking at Kennedy's perfect cheeks. She combed her fingers through her loose curls and kept pushing her cheeks higher when she smiled. "I just really love this gift, Jax, so I felt basorexia. Thank you."

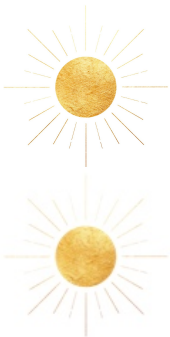
She came back in toward me, only this time she gave me a hug.

Double dang.

"Sorry if that upset you," Kennedy said, growing nervous, which was weird because I hadn't known a person like Kennedy could ever be nervous. "But that was my first kiss, and Yoana was telling me your first kiss should always be with someone you care about, and well, you're my best friend and all, and I thought—"

She stopped her words, because I kissed her. This time I knew it was me kissing and not just me standing still, all because I had intense basorexia.

16



Kennedy
Present day

I went out to the field of flowers every day that week. I'd sit in the middle of the beauty and practice my breathing. *One breath in, one breath out, heart still beating, I'm still here.*

I'd stay in that field as long as possible, feeling as if I was returning to my roots, getting back to the person I used to be. Late one evening, as I sat amidst the daisies, Jax appeared, looking a bit shaken up. The moment he noticed me, he took a step backward, as if he was going to retreat, but some kind of heaviness sat in his eyes as he stared my way.

I wondered if he saw the heaviness in my eyes, too.

I patted the spot beside me for him to join, but I had strong doubts that he would take the invitation.

My breath caught in my throat as he took a step forward and walked in my direction.

In the stillness of the night, Jax sat beside me.

After that night, I learned when he traveled to the field, and he learned my periods of meditation, too. I couldn't stop myself from arriving whenever I knew he'd be there, and he kept showing up whenever I was sitting upon that bench. Time would speed forward

and somehow stand still all at once when I was out there with Jax. When it felt as if nothing in the world made sense, at least sitting in that field calmed me. We didn't talk out there. It was as if words weren't even needed for us to find our common thread of peacefulness. His stillness felt so comforting, as if his silence was the warmest blanket he was wrapping around me.

Never in my life had I known silence could feel so good until I sat beside Jax Kilter.

It wasn't until late one afternoon, after about an hour of sitting, that I built up the courage to finally break our silence with words. It was quiet, almost a whisper. If nature hadn't been so still, he would've missed the words falling off my tongue.

"Daisy," I said, staring out at the field of flowers. "My daughter's name was Daisy. I named her after my favorite flower."

Jax turned toward me with a perplexed look on his face. "So when you came upon this field…"

I sniffled and brushed my hand beneath my nose, then nodded. "It kind of knocked me backward. The day before, I'd asked my parents for a sign, a sign that everything would be okay, that somehow I'd find my footing again, and then I went for a walk in the woods and found a field of daisies. I figured that was the sign my parents sent me."

His elbows rested on his knees, his hands clasped together as he stared forward. "I don't believe in signs."

"What do you believe in?"

His brows furrowed, and a vein in his throat throbbed as he stayed quiet.

Nothing.

He believed in nothing.

That had to be hard. If I didn't have my little beliefs, my small trusts in the universe, I was almost certain I would've died a long time ago right alongside my loved ones.

"It must be tough…not having anything to believe in."

"I've made it through this far."

"That doesn't mean it was easy."

"You're right, it doesn't. It's good that you believe in signs. I wish I could myself sometimes."

I smiled. "It's never too late to start believing in something."

"It probably is for me. Old dog, new tricks and all." He scratched at the scruff on his chin and cleared his throat. "So, the tattoo on

your wrist is for her?" he asked. "Your daughter?"

I looked down to the daisy tattoo with the backward D inside it and nodded. My mind went back to my last night with Penn when Marybeth asked about my tattoo—the way he scolded me for being unable to control my emotions, the way he shamed me for falling apart.

"Yeah, it is."

"Why is the D backward?"

"It's…I…" My chest tightened, and I felt myself starting to lose the battle with my mind.

Jax must've realized it. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," he said.

But that wasn't it. I wanted to talk about it. I needed to talk about my little girl. It was how I'd been able to keep her alive in my mind, but Penn was so against any conversations that related to her. He said it made it too hard for him to move on. Maybe that was our biggest problem: he wanted to move on while I wanted to hold on. We were pulling one another in two completely different directions. Of course it wasn't going to last. It was only a matter of time before our seam ripped.

"No, I want to, it's just that I get emotional talking about it. My husband hated that about me—how emotional I became when I talked about our daughter. He hated whenever I brought her up."

"No offense, Kennedy, but your husband sounds like an asshole."

I laughed. "He had his moments. I'm sure I wasn't the best wife in the world. I didn't make things easy for him."

"Yeah, well, I still get to hate him. But go ahead," he said, nudging my leg. "Talk about her."

I inhaled deeply and released it. "She was with me for six beautiful years. When she began writing her name, she'd write her Ds backward, every single time. I'd correct her over and over again. One day when I was telling her yet again that she was writing it wrong, she told me, with her hands on her hips, 'It's fine, Mommy. Don't take life so seriously. Ds can be backward, too.'" I laughed, wiping the tears that had fallen from my eyes. "I got the tattoo to remind myself of that idea, that I shouldn't take life too seriously. I'm still working on absorbing that message."

"What else?" he asked me.

I arched an eyebrow. "You want to know more about her?"

"Yes, if you want to share."

My broken heartbeats began to take shape again. I shifted around a bit and sat up in my chair. “Well, okay. She loved—and I mean loved—bubbles. Whenever we were upset, we’d blow a million bubbles into the air and keep doing it until we were laughing. It became a fact to us that you couldn’t be sad if there were a million bubbles surrounding you.”

He smiled.

Jax smiled.

Gosh, I hadn’t known I needed his smile until he gave it to me.

“What else?” he asked me.

“What do you mean?”

“What else do you want to share about her?”

I arched an eyebrow. “You want to know more about her?”

“Yes. If you want to share.”

I gave him more. I gave him all the details about my sweet little angel, and the way she changed my life for the better. From her favorite television shows to her favorite color. From the way she loved butterflies and chocolate cake. Then, he let me talk about my parents. How Mama’s singing voice sounded like an angel. How Daddy would tell the worst jokes in the world, and they would still be funny. How Mama snorted, how Daddy laughed like a hyena. How Daisy loved to dance in the rain.

Once the words started pouring out of my mouth, the tears that were falling turned into laughter. Laughing. I was laughing from the memories. When the laughter died down, we both sat there quiet as the sky grew darker and darker.

He cleared his throat. “I have to go visit my father at the nursing home.”

“Oh, okay. Do you need anything? Is there anything I can do? If you need someone to talk to about—”

“Sun.”

“Yes?”

He gave me a sad grin. “I’m not there yet.”

I could respect that.

He stood to his feet and held his hand toward me. “Can I walk you home through the woods?”

I took his hand. The spark was there—it never left.

We walked in silence, and when we reached my house, I thanked him.

His hands were stuffed in his pockets, and swayed back and

forth in his shoes as if he had something on his mind that he was trying to share.

"What is it?"

"Daisies were my mother's favorite flower. I planted them out there for her and to hear that that was your daughter's name makes it feel…" He snickered to himself and shook his head. "Kismet."

I smiled ear to ear. "What is this? Is Jax Kilter believing in destiny as we know it?"

"Don't hold your breath. I'm just saying." He shifted uncomfortably as he stared at my yard. "I can help you with the landscaping at your place if you need a hand. I'm sure Lars pulling out made it tricky to find someone else. My mother was a landscaper. I used to help her when I was younger, and I did the work in the woods. If you need a hand, I can do the landscaping for you."

My mother *was* a landscaper.

The word 'was' stood out more than I wanted it to.

Oh, Jax.

Let me hug you.

My lips parted in shock from his offer. "Really?"

"I don't need the commission. Connor will help me out with the project."

"I…that…" I fought the urge to wrap my arms around him and breathe him in. "Yes. Please. That would be amazing."

"I'll get supplies and get started later this week. If you have a plan, let me know. Otherwise, I can whip some blueprints together to go over with you. Just make a list of your favorite flowers and what not, any concepts you want included, and we can go from there."

"That would be great."

"Okay. I better get going."

"Thanks again, Jax—for listening to the stories about my parents and my daughter."

"I'll listen to every story you ever tell about them whenever you want to share."

He disappeared back into the woods, and the butterflies he left with me? They kept on fluttering.

17

Jax

“Time out, rewind. Deep breaths. You’re telling me, we are diving into the world of landscaping?” Connor asked as he sat at my table eating the pizza I ordered for us. He didn’t know the pizza was a bribe yet. Normally, I would’ve made him kale chips and a protein shake.

He shoved the pizza into his mouth, unaware of where this conversation was about to go. “Holy shit—”

“Language,” I order.

“Holy balls!”

“Not much better.”

“No, don’t you see, Jax? This is great! Everyone knows my lucky number is three, which is exactly what this next business venture will be for me! I’ll have three businesses before I’m even eighteen. How many businesses did Bill Gates have at seventeen? I bet you it wasn’t three, that’s for sure.”

“Seeing how you only have one business up and running, let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“Yeah, okay, partner. Wink, wink. Nudge, nudge,” he said, bumping me in the shoulder. “Do you want me to come up with a name for the business? Maybe have me make up some business cards and taglines? How about this? We trim your bushes and

fertilize your soil? Oh! Oh! Or Two Men and a Hoe?"

"Connor. Hold your hustle. We're not starting a landscaping company. We are just helping out a woman who fired Lars."

"Lars," he grumbled. "Our competition."

I wasn't even going to dive deeper into why Lars wasn't our competition, seeing how we didn't have a landscaping company. It wasn't even worth talking about. "One job, and then we are done, you got it? I called you over to look at the blueprints I drew up. I picked up some layouts of the property, and we have pretty much free rein on what we can do with it."

Kennedy's only request? Daisies, and blue flowers.

I couldn't help but smirk at the blue flowers request—it was for sure a request to drive the nosy, judgmental neighbors insane. That seemed very much like the old Kennedy I knew. She never put up with people's opinions.

Connor rubbed his hands together. "Let's use the most expensive material to drive up costs. Also, speaking of costs, how much are we charging for this project? Because knowing you, you're probably lowballing us. You really need to up your plumbing prices sooner than later. You are an artist when it comes to those pipes, Jax, and if you undervalue yourself, so will the rest of the world."

I never rolled my eyes harder. "We're not charging for this project."

His eyes widened, and he tilted his head in disbelief. "Uh, come again?"

"We're doing it as a favor."

He laughed. Connor laughed so hard that he bent over and grabbed his sides as he fell into a complete snickering fit. "Oh my gosh, my mom always says I need to clean the wax out of my ears. So, forgive me for hearing you wrong, so can you repeat how much I'm getting paid for this gig?"

"Nada. Nichts. Nothing. It's a passion project."

"My passion, Jax, is money."

I sighed as I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I can't take it all on by myself, Connor. I'm going to need your help."

"And I'm going to need funds. Since when do you even do favors for anyone outside of Joy? Whose yard are we doing?"

"Kennedy Lost. The new girl in town."

"Oh my gosh." Connor grew a sinister smirk and began nudging me in the arm. "Is this a booty call type thing? Are you two

bumping uglies?"

"Never say bumping uglies again…like…never."

"Listen, if you two are bumping uglies, then that's something I can get behind. I'm all about my bro getting laid, and if you need me to plant a few seeds as your wingman, I'm all in. Are you doing her yard to get into her garden? Are you trying to lay down some cucumbers next to her peach tree? Is there an oversized eggplant—"

"Connor!" I shouted. "Shut up."

He couldn't stop snickering to himself. Even if he wasn't amusing me, he was highly entertained. I swore, that kid was his own biggest fan.

"I'm not sleeping with her," I said, hoping to shut that idea down.

He raised an eyebrow. "No sex?"

"No sex."

"Maybe foreplay?"

"Nope."

"A little tongue twister?"

"Not at all."

I'd never seen him look so disappointed. He pushed his hands against the countertop edge, shaking his head in utter disbelief. "All right, Imma head out."

"Connor, come on." I grimaced and sighed. "Please."

He turned to me as if I'd grown another head. "Did you…did you just say please?" he asked, placing his hands against his chest in shock. "Never in my life have I heard you say the word please to me!"

"Don't be so dramatic."

"I'm not being dramatic. You have never said please to me. Ever."

"It's that important to me."

I couldn't believe I was pretty much begging a seventeen-year-old to help me on this project. Desperate didn't even begin to cover it.

"Okay, but I have some guidelines."

"Shoot."

"Three times a week, we get to eat shitty food for lunch."

I narrowed my eyes and crossed my arms. "Two times a week."

"Four times a week and we'll have a deal."

"No chance in"—he began to walk away, and I groaned—"fine,

three times a week."

"Okay, cool. And! You have to come to my banging birthday bash that you missed last year because you said you were busy, which—by the way—I know you weren't busy because you don't have any friends, therefore there was nothing to be busy with. I'm turning the big one-eight, so the turn up is going to be huge Jax! My mom's throwing the biggest party yet, and I have the biggest news in the world to announce at the party, and I need my partner in crime to be there, So, you have to come."

"Fine. Deal."

"It's a twenty-five-dollar entry fee, but for you, it's going to have to be a hundred."

This punk was really putting it on heavy.

I cocked an eyebrow. "All right. You done?"

He held his hand out toward me. "You got a deal, partner."

"Boss," I corrected as I shook his hand.

"Whatever. As far as I'm concerned, we are in a fifty-fifty partnership from this point on." He closed the box of pizza and took it as if I offered him the whole thing. "I gotta get home to search what it takes to be a landscaper so I'm a professional by morning. Send me an email with your blueprints, and I'll make them better."

"Thanks, Con."

His eyes widened. "Please and thank you in one conversation? I better tell my mom to play the lottery tonight because I'm feeling lucky. By the way, if we don't use Two Men and a Hoe for our landscaping company, we should highly consider Two Men and a Wrench for our plumbing business. It has a nice ring to it."

"Good night, Connor."

"Night, Jax."

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* * *

Connor wasn't kidding about going home to research the ins and outs of landscaping. When we met up again to pick up supplies, he was well equipped with his knowledge on tools, plants, and soil.

No one could ever say that he wasn't a hard worker. He put his all into every project he took on. After we got to Kennedy's property to start digging up the land, Connor tackled the backyard while I took on the front.

After offering both Connor and me water, Kennedy returned to her porch and picked up her reading material. I couldn't stop myself from glancing her way whenever she'd laugh out loud. Her laugh was one of the most beautiful sounds I'd ever heard. Truthfully, even when she wasn't laughing, I was still looking her way.

Sometimes she'd catch me, and I'd turn away fast. Other times, I'd give her a halfway grin before getting back to work. When a little girl came riding past the front yard on her bicycle, with her father holding her steady, Kennedy's eyes snapped up from the book and fell to the father and daughter duo.

I saw the light in her eyes vanish from watching the two of them interacting. It was the same way when she saw the little girl eating ice cream. Was it always like that for her? Whenever she saw children, did her mind freeze in a daze of confusion and hurt?

"Sun," I called out, breaking Kennedy from her own thoughts.

She turned my way and tilted her head. "Yes?"

"Who do you talk to?"

"What do you mean?"

"Who do you talk to about everything you've been through?"

She gave me a broken smile and shrugged. "No one. It's okay. I'm okay."

"You should talk to a therapist, or something. They can help." True, I wasn't one hundred percent fixed, but I liked to think that no human being on this Earth was one hundred percent healed from past tragedies. Yet I did think talking to Eddie throughout the years did help me. Sometimes it was nice to have a professional person to reach out to for a hand.

"I'm okay, Jax." She pressed on a fake smile. "Don't worry about me."

She went back to her book, and I did the exact opposite of what she said, I worried. As she kept reading, I kept shoving and overthinking.

"Uh, hello? Earth to Jax?" Connor said, walking in front of me and waving his hands around. "Dude, are you deaf? I've been calling you for the past two minutes and you've been in some like weird daze staring at Kennedy like a psychopath."

I shook my head. "What? I wasn't staring at her."

"Yes, you were." He narrowed his eyes as Kennedy stood to head into the house. He snatched the shovel out of my hands. "I thought you said you two weren't screwing each other."

“We aren’t.”

“Then why are you eye-fucking her in public?”

“Don’t say eye-fucking,” I groaned.

“And don’t avoid my question.”

“You don’t get it. Kennedy and I have…history.”

He wiggled his eyebrows, pleased.

“Not that kind of history, dork. Don’t get excited,” I explained. “We used to be best friends when we were kids. It was a long time ago, but she was a big part of my life.”

“Wait. Time out. Smoking hot Kennedy used to be your best friend?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you guys now?”

“Nothing. We’re just two people who live in the same neighborhood.”

Connor laughed. “But you want more. Does she want more? Does she want to be your friend or something?”

“No, I mean, I don’t know.” Damn, was it really that hot outside? Was I sweating? Why was Connor asking me so many questions? “I mean, she mentioned being friends a while back in the woods, but I figured it was just because she felt bad for me.”

“Orrr,” he dragged out. “She wanted to be your friend.”

I paused.

I thought.

I denied.

“No. I don’t think so.”

Connor laughed and rolled his eyes. “For a big strong guy who runs his own business, you sure are stupid sometimes. If this isn’t a Disney movie in the making, I don’t know what is. You’re Elsa and she’s Anna, and you need to hang out with her. Don’t make her beg you to build a snowman. Just do it.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Do you often reference the movie Frozen for your pep talks?”

“It seems you knew exactly what my reference meant, so it worked. I mean, hell, Jax. Look, you have this woman, this insanely beautiful woman, who is asking to be friends with you and share her company with you, and you declined? Are you insane?”

“I offered to help with her yard.”

“What does that have to do with hanging out with her? Dude. I know I can be annoying and dramatic, but you should be her friend.

You need more friends than me."

"Since when are we friends?" I joked.

"Don't play with my feelings, Jax. You know I'm emotional. Seriously. Just hang out with her. What was the worst that could happen?"

I shrugged. She could realize I wasn't worthy of her friendship. I didn't say that, though. It seemed too emo, even for me.

"Just find something she likes and hang out with her doing that stuff. Then, it can get even better than that, because do you know what's the best thing this could happen?" Connor asked.

"What's that?"

"Friends-with-benefits." He started humping the air.

"And that's the end of this conversation."

"Ask her out, Jax."

"No."

"Ask her out on a friendship-date."

"No."

"Just ask her—"

"Okay!" I hollered, tossing my hands up in the air. "If I asked her to hang out will that get you to shut up about it?"

"Obviously. Don't worry, you can thank me later."

18

Jax

I dropped Connor off at his house, said hello to his mother, and checked in if they were in need of anything. She declined but thanked me for the offer. Before heading to visit my father,

I made a pitstop at Eddie and Marie's house. As I rang the doorbell, a knot sat heavily in my stomach. When Eddie came to the door, he looked perplexed to see me standing there, but then a small smile curved his lips.

"You missed another appointment," he commented, opening his screen door to talk to me.

"Yeah, I know. Been busy. Listen, can I talk to you really quick?"

His eyes lit up with hope as he stepped aside. "Yes, of course. My couch is always open for you, Jax. Come on in."

I walked into the house, rubbing my hands together.

Marie came out from the back room and grinned brightly when she saw me. "Oh, hi, Jax. How are you doing? I haven't seen you since the ana—"

"Marie, can you make some coffee for us? We are going to hold an impromptu session in the living room." Eddie clearly did not want to bring up the last time I crossed paths with Marie and their bathroom sink.

I smirked a little at the annoyed therapist. "I don't need coffee. I

won't be staying long."

"Are you sure? I have all the time in the world to give you, Jax. Really, it isn't a problem. I know with everything going on with your father—"

"This isn't about my father," I said.

"Oh?" He sat down in his living room chair and clasped his hands together as I took a seat on the couch. "Then what is it about?"

"Your neighbor, Kennedy. The new girl."

"Well, that's not what I was expecting you to talk about, but if there is a new woman in your life after Amanda, I am more than—"

"No, she's not in my life. I mean, she was at one point, but she's not anymore. I'm just helping her with her landscaping."

"What do you mean she was in your life at one point?"

"She used to be my best friend when we were younger. We went to summer camp together."

Eddie's brows furrowed, and he nodded very slowly and therapist-like. "Intriguing."

"No, it's not. It's nothing."

"Oh?"

"Stop it, Eddie. That's not why I'm here. I'm not here to talk about my past with Kennedy or dive deep into my psyche. My visit actually has nothing to do with me."

"Then…why are you…?"

"She needs your help."

Eddie scratched at the side of his salt and pepper beard. "Jax, that's not how it works."

"She went through a trauma. She lost both of her parents and her daughter in a car accident that she blames herself for. She can't even see a child without being hit with a panic attack. Joy told me Kennedy doesn't drive because of the accident, and she hasn't spoken to anyone professional about her issues."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Jax, but I can't offer her help without her—"

"You don't have to therapist her, Eddie. Just…I don't fucking know—be nosy like the rest of the people in this town and go check on her out of neighborly kindness. She's broken and just needs someone to talk to."

"Can she talk to you?"

"I don't know how to fix her."

“I don’t either, Jax. Plus, as a therapist, we don’t fix people, because in my mind, they aren’t broken. They are just complex.”

“Yeah, well, just go see about her complexities.”

“Ja—”

“Fuck, Eddie,” I shouted, jumping up from the couch. I gestured in the direction of Kennedy’s house. “She’s drowning. She’s in that house alone, and she’s drowning in her memories and guilt. I know what that’s like. I know what it’s like to drown from all of that shit, but at least I had you to go to. At least I had someone to talk to over the years. Kennedy has no one. Please, Eddie. Just…” I sighed and rubbed my hands down my face. “Help her.”

I looked his way and saw the guilt sitting in his eyes.

He wasn’t going to help her.

Fuck.

“You know what? Never mind. It was stupid for me to come over here. Sorry for wasting your time.”

“You didn’t waste my time, Jax. This is good. This is all good for your progress,” he said as he pushed himself up from his chair.

“My progress? I told you this wasn’t about me.”

He gave me a knowing look, and I hated it.

“She was your best friend,” he stated. “It’s not shocking that your feelings have resurfaced about her with her arrival in town. That’s completely normal, and you don’t have to be freaked out by your feelings. Your concern is warranted.”

“I’m not freaked out by my feelings because I’m not feeling anything about it. What don’t you get? I’m fine. I healed. I did my therapy.”

“You healed?” he asked, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his slacks.

“Yes. I did the work. I got better.”

He narrowed his eyes and swayed back and forth. “How are things with your father, Jax?”

My hands formed fists and my nails began digging into my skin. “Don’t do that, Eddie.”

“Do what?”

He knew exactly what I meant. I didn’t have to talk to him about my father. I was dealing with it. I was getting through it. I was fine. I was more than okay. I was better. It was Kennedy who needed his therapist stares. It was her who was falling apart.

“Forget it. I’m leaving. Thanks,” I muttered, walking toward his

front door.

Eddie followed me, and when I stepped onto his front porch, he spoke. “It’s good that she has you. Maybe that’s what she needs more than therapy—just someone to be there for her.”

“I’m not a good person to be there for others, doc. That shit doesn’t work out for me.”

“Every day is a new opportunity to try again. Maybe you can renew your past friendship with Kennedy. That could be healing for the both of you.”

What is with these people? First Connor was telling me to build a fucking snowman with Kennedy and now Eddie was pushing me to befriend her, too. I was pretty sure Joy would get on that train soon enough, too.

What didn’t they understand? I didn’t need a friend. I just wanted Kennedy to get the help she deserved. She had once been so vibrant, so bright and full of light, and now? Her light had faded, which was a fucking shame, because she was the kind of light that made even the darkest soul feel bright.

I brushed my hand over my mouth. “It’s unfair. She’s good, Eddie. She’s so good. She doesn’t deserve that kind of suffering.”

“No one does, Jax, including you. When we can’t lean on ourselves, it’s nice to have others to lean on, too.” I gave him a broken smile, and to my surprise, Eddie called out once more. “I’ll check in on her. You know, as a neighborly gesture.”

My frozen heart? Holy shit, it started beating again.

“Really?” I asked, my voice cracking.

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure we haven’t taken her any food like the rest of the people in this town have. I was trying to avoid being that cliché but it can’t hurt.”

“Thank you, Eddie,” I said, more sincere than ever.

He nodded once and turned to head back into his house.

“Chocolate chip cookies,” I called out. “They were always her favorite.”

“Chocolate chip—a classic. Good night, Jax.”

“Night, Eddie.”

After my visit with Eddie, I stopped by the nursing home to read my father his chapters. He was much more aggressive that night and irritated with everything and everyone—including me. I didn’t get to read much to him that night, and when I got home, I couldn’t stop recalling the ways he used to get so irritated at me for the

strangest things. I wished I could turn off my thoughts. I wished I could make my memories fade away, but I couldn't. By the time I got home, I poured myself a glass of whiskey before I crashed hard into my bed, and exhaustion swallowed me whole.

19

Jax
Twelve years old
Year two of summer camp

"That's a cardinal!" Kennedy shouted, pointing up toward the sky as we used our binoculars on the last day of summer camp. Half the time she pointed out a bird, it was the wrong bird, but I didn't correct her. She was too happy about finding it, so I let her think what she wanted to think.

Besides, by the time I explained the actual bird sighting, she'd already be on to another. Her mind moved so fast, and I couldn't always keep up with it, but that was okay because I just liked having her around.

I hated how fast the summer went, and if I could have, I'd have made Kennedy my neighbor so we could see each other all the time. How was I going to make it another whole year without seeing her?

Maybe my mom would drive me to visit, or Kennedy could come visit me.

When it was time for us to get our bags, I had a knot in my stomach. I didn't want her to go. For the first time that summer, Kennedy was quiet, too. I didn't know if I should ask her about her quietness because I didn't want to bring it up if she didn't.

Honestly, all I'd been thinking about was if I would be able to

kiss her again before we left, and I didn't want to kiss her in front of her family or mine, because gross. Derek would probably make fun of me forever if he caught me kissing a girl, even if that girl was Kennedy.

"Are you okay?" I finally asked as we sat on top of the big rock in front of the main entrance to the camp, waiting for our parents to come pick us up.

"Yeah," she mumbled as a tear fell down her cheek. "I'm just going to miss you a lot more than last time because now I know a lot more about you, which means I have a lot more to miss, and that just makes me sad."

"Oh." I wasn't as good at explaining my feelings as Kennedy. She was good at saying words. I was good at writing them.

Instead, I just hugged her. "You're my best friend," I whispered.

She squeezed me and said the same back to me.

"So you're the boy making my daughter become a better writer," a voice said, making me let go of Kennedy. I looked up to see a grown-up who looked kind of like Kennedy in some ways and kind of not like her in other ways.

"Dad!" Kennedy leaped up and wrapped her arms around him, and he lifted her up and began spinning her around and around in circles. "I missed you!"

"I missed you, too, babe!" he said, sounding just as excited as his daughter.

"I'm sure you have some more love to give to your mama and sister, too," Mrs. Lost said, leaping in with Kennedy's sister for hugs.

I couldn't wait to hug my mom that same way. I liked seeing Kennedy a lot, but I still missed Mom a lot, too.

"Jax, we've heard wonderful things about you," Mrs. Lost said, looking my way. She really looked like Kennedy. Maybe it was the smile that was the most similar. "And since you and Kennedy had another successful year of summer camp, I was thinking maybe you should add a memory to the Lost-mobile." She pulled out some Sharpies, and Kennedy squeaked with joy.

"Yes!" she hollered, snatching the markers from Mrs. Lost's hand. Then she gripped my hand in hers and pulled me over quickly. "Come on, Jax! Let's make something!"

I laughed. "You really want me to draw on your car?" I asked, nervous. Dad would've killed me if I drew on a car. Once, I accidentally spilled a soda in his back seat, and I got a spanking like

no other.

"Yeah! It's our memory car. Here." She handed me a marker. "Draw however you want this summer to be remembered, okay?"

I bit my bottom lip and took the cap off the marker. After some thought, I began to draw a heart, and I put both of our initials in it.

"There," I said, handing her the Sharpie.

Under it, Kennedy wrote *Friends forever*, and I knew it was true.

Forever and ever.

As we were standing by her car, laughing with Kennedy's family, my Dad's truck pulled up to the campsite.

The moment he saw me, he began beeping his horn, and hollering at me. "Jax! Get your ass over here so we can go."

My stomach started hurting because I was embarrassed. Where was Mom? Why wasn't she picking me up? I made the stupid mistake of asking Dad that question, which forced him to get out of his car. He was cussing under his breath as he walked over toward me.

"She's sick, does it matter? I told you to get the fuck into the car. Let's go," he barked.

Kennedy's dad stepped forward with a smile. "Now, come on. That level of anger isn't really necessary. The kids were just saying goodbye, that's all."

Dad eyed him up and down. "How about you mind your own fucking business?"

"Okay, Dad," I said, my body shaking. "Let's go. I'm coming."

I could see the look of shock on all of Kennedy's family from the way Dad was acting. How didn't he see it? How didn't he see how he was embarrassing me? How didn't he see how mean he was being?

He grabbed my luggage and dragged it away before tossing it into the back of the bed of the truck.

I turned and gave Kennedy's family a weak smile. "It was nice meeting you all. Have a good day," I said.

Kennedy's dad tasseled my head and gave me a grin as he lowered himself to me. "You okay, Jax? Are you okay with your dad? I'm sure we can get you a ride home if you need or—"

"Jax! Get your ass over here!" Dad hollered, making me jump out of my skin. I knew the more I upset him, the worse it would be for me.

"I'm okay, Mr. Lost. Thank you. I h-have to go," I stuttered. At

that moment I wished he could've been my dad. Kennedy didn't know how lucky she was to have someone nice like him. Someone who didn't yell at her and call her names.

Kennedy ambushed me in a tight hug and squeezed me. She smashed our cheeks together, and I felt her tears against my skin. "I'm sorry that he's so mean, Jax."

"It's okay," I whispered. "I'm okay."

She held me tighter before softly speaking. "If you need to run away, run away to me."

20

Jax
Present day

There was a knocking on my front door, and I got up quickly to answer it. Standing in the pouring rain was Kennedy with the most intense stare in her eyes. She was soaking wet from head to toe, wearing only a white tank top and shorts.

"Hi," she said breathlessly, shaking the water from her loose curls. "Are you okay?"

I raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"I heard about your dad. People were talking in town. I just wanted to check on you and make sure you were doing okay. I can only imagine what you're dealing with."

I scratched at my beard. When had it begun to rain? When I'd gone to bed, it had been nice and warm outside. "Uh, yeah. I just saw him. He's fine. You came over to check on me?"

"Of course I did, Jax. I wanted to make sure you were okay. Can I come in?"

What the hell is going on? I wanted to ask her that, but truthfully a bigger part of me wanted her in my house with me. I'd been alone in it for way too long; some company would be nice.

I stepped to the side and she came in, shivering from being soaked.

“I can get you some—” Before I could finish my thought, Kennedy crashed her body into mine. Her hard nipples pressed through her tank top as she pulled me into a hug, and I tried my best to ignore the sensation having her wet body flush with mine was sending to me—or, more so, sending straight to my throbbing cock.

“I’m so sorry, Moon,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around my neck, pulling me tighter against her. “I’m so sorry.”

Before I could respond, her lips pressed to my neck, and she gave me small kisses. “I’m sorry, I just…Jax, I missed you.” She kissed the base of my neck again, this time rolling her tongue across my skin. “Did you miss me, too? Did you miss me, Jax?”

Her words dripped with care and wonder as I wrapped my arms around her and lifted her up against me. I pressed her back against the wall and closed my eyes as my forehead fell to hers. “Kennedy, you shouldn’t be here. We shouldn’t be doing this…”

Her lips brushed mine. “I know, but still…” She took my bottom lip between hers and sucked on it gently. “I want to do this. Please, Jax…after all these years…after losing you for so long…I can’t stop thinking about you. Do you think of me, too?” She opened her eyes and stared into mine. “Do I cross your mind like you cross mine?”

“Yes.” I sighed as my hands stayed clasped under her ass cheeks. “God, Kennedy, you’ve crossed my mind so damn much.”

“Show me your bedroom,” she whispered against my earlobe before sucking it. Sure, my heart was still frozen, but my cock grew three sizes that night. *What is she doing to me?* Hell, I didn’t care. I just wanted her to keep doing it.

I carried her to my bedroom and lay her down on my sheets. Hurriedly, she tossed her tank to the side of the room and unbuckled her shorts then slid them down her long, toned legs, along with her pink panties.

Me next.

I tossed my clothes to the side, and before I moved in on her, I studied her carefully. The girl I used to call my best friend was no longer a girl. No, she was a grown-ass woman with the most perfect body I’d ever seen in all of my time. Her tits were perky and round, her nipples hard, and her curves—*damn*. The way her body curved looked like a piece of artwork that deserved to be displayed in a museum.

Yet it was all mine.

Her eyes wandered to my throbbing cock, which I was stroking in my hand as I studied her body. She crooked her pointer finger and gestured for me to come over with a devilish smirk upon her lips. I did as she commanded, towering over her as I lowered myself onto her body. My lips danced across hers, and she moaned as she placed her hands on my back and pulled me in closer. My dick brushed her core as she spread her legs for me.

"Please," she begged, her honey eyes staring into me, into my soul. "I want all of you, Jax. Every piece, every inch." Her voice turned into a whisper filled with desire. "Fuck me with your darkness."

Didn't have to tell me twice.

I slid myself deep inside her, and she cried out in complete pleasure. "More, more," she begged, pleaded, demanded.

I couldn't deny her any of her wants and needs, because her needs were my wants. I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted anyone, more than I'd ever known I deserved to need something. Her body against mine felt like sin and her lips tasted like heaven. She was the sweetest part of my past, and I couldn't believe I was having her in my present.

Her moans lit me up more and more as I pumped my cock deeper into her, filling her up with every piece of me.

"Yes, yes, yes," she cried out, wrapping her legs around my waist as she twisted the bedsheets in her fingers. "Right there, Jax. Yes, please," she said over and over again.

I focused my mind on only pleasing her. She was all I cared about at that very minute. She was all I wanted, all I needed, all I'd ever dreamed of.

As I pumped faster, she tilted her head to the left, toward my bedroom window, and gasped lightly. "It's snowing," she whispered.

The fuck?

I looked out my window, and…*I'll be damned.* The rainstorm had shifted over to a blizzard. Since when did we have blizzards in Kentucky in the middle of the damn summer?

She placed her hands upon my cheeks and made me turn back to her. "Focus on me, Jax, on this, on us," she commanded. "Keep your eyes on me."

I did as she said, sliding deeper into her, pulling out slowly, and pounding her fast. Damn, she felt so good against my cock. She felt

so wet, and I knew that wetness was for me. I loved that I did that to her. I loved that I made her wet.

"Do you…" She breathed heavily. "Do you want…" She sighed, rolling her hips hard against me.

"What? Tell me and I'll do it," I promised.

"Do you want to…oh gosh, yes, right there, Jax…"

"Say it," I demanded. "Tell me want you want."

Her eyes locked with mine, and in the most sincere tone, she said, "Do you…" Moan. "Want to…" It began snowing over us. "Build…" On the edge of an orgasm. "A…" Seriously, it was snowing over my bed. "*Snoooowman*?" she screamed, dragging out the word as she released herself around my hardness, leaving me dazed and confused as the snow fell down on our naked bodies.

What…the…fuck?

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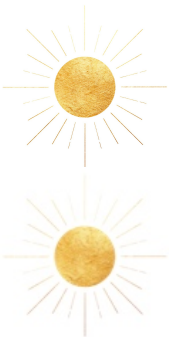
* * *

I shook myself out of the most fucked-up dream I'd had in the history of ever. "What the actual fuck?!" I said, looking down at my wide-awake dick. I couldn't come to grips with the fact that I'd just had a sex dream about Kennedy Lost…that had turned into a Disney singalong.

No more whiskey before bedtime.

And no more allowing Connor to sing fucking Disney songs while in my presence.

21



Kennedy

“Chocolate chip cookies? Now you’re speaking my language.” I smiled as I looked at the newest greeter standing at my door.

Eddie held the plate of freshly baked goods in front of me. “I have to admit that Marie cooked them—I’m just the deliveryman.”

“The gesture is appreciated,” I said. For a few moments, an awkward silence filled the space as Eddie swayed back and forth in his shoes, brushing his thumb across his nose. I arched an eyebrow. “Why do I feel like there’s something you’re not saying?”

“Because there’s something I’m not saying?” he replied, his statement coming out as a question.

“What’s going on, Eddie?”

“It’s Jax. He came to me the other day and asked if I would stop by to check in on you, to see how things are going—from a neighborly perspective, not as a therapist.”

My stomach knotted up. “Of course he did. I’m not sure what Jax has told you, but I’m okay. Truly. I’ve been through some things, but I’m working my way through my issues one day at a time.”

“Right, of course. And it is completely up to you if you choose to seek out professional help or not. Truthfully, that’s not why I’m

here."

Even more confusion stirred inside me. "Then what is it?"

"It's Jax," he repeated, this time with his lips turning down. "I just worry about him—as a neighborly human, not as a therapist. I worry he's not coping with his father's ill health. I feel as if he's deflecting his personal struggles by focusing on yours. Do you think he's coping well?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure. Truthfully, we just began to speak. We were friends way back in the day, but I haven't had a chance to really see Jax as a grown man."

"Really?" he asked. "That's strange because he speaks about you as if you two are close…which also confused me, seeing how Jax doesn't get close to anyone." He scratched at his beard. "Anyway, I'll stop digging for clues. I just wanted to drop those cookies off because Jax pretty much hammered it down my throat that I need to check to see if you were okay."

I smiled. "I'm thankful for the check-in."

"It's not like him, you know—to care. You mean something to him, even if you think this is all new. For him to come to me and ask for help…that's a big deal for him. From the outside looking in, it might seem small, but for Jax that's massive progress in his growth. I don't know what you're doing to him, Kennedy, but please, keep doing it." He turned and walked down the stairs. "And if you ever need a listening ear from a neighbor, my couch is always open."

I bit into one of the cookies as Eddie walked away, my mind filled with lingering thoughts of what it meant that Jax had gone searching for someone to help me. I simply hoped he was reaching out for help for himself, too.

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I'd never known landscaping could be extremely sexy before the day I watched Jax pick up a shovel. Each day he and Connor came over, I found reasons to be outside, and each time I caught Jax looking my way, I'd get a brand-new case of butterflies filling my stomach. He didn't really talk to me much, and when he did, the conversation was pretty much about the landscaping.

Late one Monday afternoon, the Kentucky sun was beating down

on us as if it had no care in the world for darkening our skin fifty shades. I kept refreshing the guys' water as they were hard at work throughout the day. When I came out with a pitcher of ice water to fill up their glasses once more, I almost tripped over my feet upon seeing Jax.

There he was, shirtless and kneeling in the dirt as he was planting a rose bush. His body was rock hard, and his tan skin glistened in the sunlight. His white T-shirt was tucked into the back pocket of his Levi jeans, and I was officially back to my Joe-from-*You* stalking vibes.

Had his butt always been that magical and plump? Geez, all I wanted to do was walk over to him, place my two hands against his butt cheeks, and squeeze.

Look away, look away, look—

"Is that for us?" Connor's voice said from behind me, making me jump out of my skin, and the pitcher of water in my hand went flying forward, crashing right into Jax's body.

"Fuck!" he said, rising to his feet from the chill that engulfed him. He jumped in place, shaking off the water.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry!" I exclaimed, rushing over to him. "I got spooked, I'm so sorry," I said, reaching for the first thing I could think of to dry him off: the T-shirt in his back pocket. And now I was rubbing my hands up and down Jax's chest.

Up and down his abs.

His abs…

So. Many. Abs.

Is that a six-pack party going on there? Or did I just count eight? And why, oh why can't I stop rubbing him down?

"Uh, I think we're good, Kennedy." Jax smirked.

"Good, good, yes, we're good," I muttered, still rubbing.

He laughed and placed his hands on my arms, halting my movements. "It's okay, really."

Oh, Jax, if only you knew how more than okay we are right now.

"Right, of course." I stepped back, his shirt still in my hand. "Sorry, I was just…I lost my focus for a minute."

Connor chuckled. "What were you staring at?" he teased.

My face heated and I was certain both of them could see the embarrassment rising high in my cheeks.

"Yeah," Jax asked. "What caught your attention?"

All that junk in your trunk, sir.

I shook my head. “Oh, uh, a squirrel—chasing a cat,” I blurted out. *What?* “I mean, a cat chasing a squirrel.” They both arched an eyebrow in confusion. I waved my hands. “You know what? Doesn’t matter. Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. We are about to stop for the day anyway,” Jax said, running his hand through his dripping wet hair. The water droplets dripped, dripped, dripped right down his chest, chest, chest, and oh my gosh, did I watch those drops slide down every inch of him.

What is wrong with me? Had it been so long since I’d seen a shirtless man that I was now fixated on Jax’s chest?

Though, to be fair, not many men had chests like his.

“Okay, I’ll start loading stuff into the truck. Jax, in the meantime, why don’t you talk to Kennedy about that thing you and I spoke about the other day,” Connor mentioned.

Jax shot Connor the dirtiest look and hissed through his clenched teeth. “Now’s probably not the right time, Connor.”

“No time like the present, big guy,” Connor sang, walking past Jax and patting his shoulder before grabbing some of their supplies and heading toward the truck.

I raised an eyebrow. “Is everything okay?”

Jax cleared his throat and scrunched up his face before scratching at his chin. “Um, yeah. It’s just, uh, well, I…” He was stumbling over his words, and in an instant, I was reminded of the boy I used to know. “It’s just, um, Connor thinks you need friends.”

I stood straighter. “What?”

He waved his hands quickly. “No, not like you need friends. I mean, I know you could get friends if you wanted. And you might have them. You might have friends, I mean I could get people wanting to be that, you know, like your friend.” He turned away from me and ran his hands through his hair again, mumbling a *Fuck* under his breath. He turned back to me with a grimace on his face and narrowed eyes. “Do you want to be my friend maybe? Like, do you want to hang out sometimes? Maybe cross some crap off that list in that notebook you got? I mean, if you want to know this town, I’m the one to show you it. I know this place inside and out. I can show you the world…of Havenbarrow at least.”

I snickered. “Are you asking to be my Aladdin?”

“Something like that.” He swayed nervously in his shoes, and even when he was shirtless, his dorky side was coming out loud and clear. “I don’t have a magic carpet, though. Just a beat-up pickup

truck."

I bit my bottom lip and glanced to my left, where Joy was smiling to herself as she wrote away in her notebook. I was almost certain she was listening in and that smile on her face was for Jax's shyness.

He rubbed at the back of his neck, and his hair fell over his face a little, making him look that much more rigid and handsome. "If you aren't interested, it's not a big deal. Yeah, no, it's a stupid idea. Sorry I even asked. Look, let me get out of your—"

"Can we start with Marshmallow at the coffee shop?" I cut in, making the nervous guy stop fidgeting.

"The coffee shop?"

"Yeah. I want to meet the coffee shop cat. Plus, I've heard they have a great chai latte."

"Right. Yeah, okay." The light that touched Jax's eyes made my own heart light up. "Yeah, that's a good idea. Okay. Cool. Maybe I can pick you up tomorrow morning? Unless you're busy, because if you're busy—"

"Nine AM works."

He grimaced. "I normally have coffee with Joy at nine…"

"Oh hush, boy. Go see the coffee shop cat. I'll be here any other day," Joy yelled, waving his comment off and making it clear that she was eavesdropping on our conversation.

I smiled. "So, see you at nine?"

"Yeah," Jax agreed. His lips curved up, and I felt lucky to witness it. Jax didn't smile very often, so when he did, it felt like the sweetest dessert. He began to back up toward his truck, where Connor was waiting. "Cool. Awesome. It's a date." He paused, wiggled his nose, and cringed. "I mean, not like a date-date, but like a friend-date. You know like—"

"Aaand okay, this has been cringeworthy enough for all of us, so I'm going to pull this guy away. Have a good night, Kennedy. Jax will see you in the morning," Connor said, dragging his boss away. I snickered as he scolded Jax. "Dude! I told you to play it cool, and that was the complete opposite of cool! Could you be any more awkward?"

Jax told Connor to shut the hell up, making me laugh to myself.

Connor didn't know it, but seeing awkward Jax made me a million times happier than I'd been in a while. For the first time in a long time, things felt…normal.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Joy said after the guys drove off. “He really needs a friend.”

If only she knew how much I needed one, too.

* * *

“I’m going to be honest, you might be a little underwhelmed by Marshmallow. The guy can be a bit of an asshole,” Jax explained as we drove into town. I tried my best not to show my anxiety about being in a vehicle, but I was losing the battle. Thankfully, we arrived within ten minutes.

I gave him a tight smile. “I don’t see myself ever being disappointed by a famous small-town cat. Besides, I kind of have a thing for the assholes of this town,” I joked as he pulled up and parked on the curb in front of the coffee shop.

He smiled a little, and my heart did a flip.

“I like when you smile,” I said, unbuckling my seat belt. “It reminds me of younger Jax.”

“Your smiles kind of make me want to smile more,” he confessed, hopping out of the car.

We walked into the coffee shop, and I ordered my drink, which Jax refused to let me pay for. “You can get mine next time,” he offered.

My heart skipped a beat at the idea of a next time with him. He had no idea how many more next times I wanted with him.

We sat down at a table, and I kept looking around for Marshmallow as I sipped at what might’ve been the best chai tea latte I’d ever had in my life. That cup alone was enough to keep me in Havenbarrow. And the banana loaf? Oh my gosh, it melted in my mouth.

“This is probably the best thing I’ve ever eaten,” I moaned, licking the crumbs off my fingers.

Jax snickered. “Don’t let Gary from the café hear you say that. He and the owner here have been going back and forth for decades about who makes the best banana loaves.”

“Okay, but I’m just saying. I could eat fifty slices of this and not get tired of it. Honestly, I’ve probably eaten more carbs in the past few weeks of being in Havenbarrow than I have in my whole life due to people bringing me sweets. I swear, I’m almost certain they

are trying to make me gain the small-town fifteen or something."

"Knowing the women in this town, I wouldn't put it past them."

"Well, as long as I don't own a scale and I have a pair of yoga pants that fit, I'm A-OK with packing on the weight," I joked as I leaned forward and stole a piece of Jax's banana loaf. "Now, where's this cat?"

"Probably sleeping or pissing on someone's foot," Jax said, glancing around. "I kid you not, three years ago that little fucker walked up to me as I was getting my coffee and peed on my shoe—like a psychopath."

I tried my best to hold in my chuckle, but I couldn't help it. The idea of a cat pissing on Jax killed me. "What did you do to him to make him mad?"

He sat back, baffled by my question. "What did I do? Are you joking? I was just getting coffee!"

"Maybe he was upset that you were in his territory. You know, only one asshole per coffee shop and all."

"He's like that to everyone." Jax shrugged. "He's Mr. Personality around these parts."

I smirked at the nickname. He didn't have a clue that that was what I'd been calling him for a solid week when I arrived in town. I'd keep that secret close to my chest.

Just then, a big, plump white cat came out from around back and yawned as he stretched his legs.

"Oh. My. Gosh!" I squealed, leaping up from my seat. He was the cutest thing I'd ever seen in my whole life. "Hi there, friend." I beamed as I approached him.

"Uh, I wouldn't do that if I were you," Jax said, backing his chair farther away from the approaching feline.

I grinned his way. "Come on, don't tell me you're afraid of a little pussy cat."

"Trust me, I'm not afraid of pussy," he said, and his suggestive words sent a pool of heat to my core. "But I am terrified of that beast."

I rolled my eyes and sat down on the coffee shop floor in front of Marshmallow. I held my arms out in front of me. "Come get some loving," I ordered.

"Sun, wait—" Before Jax could finish his sentence, Marshmallow was in my lap, purring away. He rolled over for belly rubs, and it looked to me as if he was having the time of his life. "Holy crap,"

Jax muttered. “He likes you.”

“I’m a likable person.”

He smiled but didn’t say anything else. He sat back in amusement as Marshmallow and me became the best of friends.

“Maybe I read that guy wrong,” he commented, standing up and walking in our direction. As he grew closer, Marshmallow hissed and hurried away. “Fuck you too, Marsh,” Jax replied, flipping him off.

I laughed and picked myself up off the ground. “Some people and cats just don’t connect I guess.”

“It’s not shocking that he liked you. You are hard not to like,” Jax said, sipping at his drink. I sat back in my chair and stared at him, and while I stared at him, everyone—and I mean everyone—was staring at us.

“Is it just me, or are we being watched?” I asked, biting my bottom lip.

“Yeah. This town has a way of being pretty invasive in other people’s lives. Normally, I just do this,” he said as he held up both his middle fingers. A few customers gasped at his gesture, calling him a jerk.

I laughed. “First the cat and now the people.”

“I’m an equal opportunist with my hatred. I hate everything and everyone with the same amount of annoyance.”

“Even me?” I joked.

His eyes grew somber for a split second, and the small smile on his lips began to fade. “I could never hate you, Kennedy. Trust me, a long time ago, I tried.”

His words rocked me sideways as I narrowed my eyes. “Wait, what? Why would you try to hate me?”

He shook his head and cleared his throat. “Doesn’t matter, it was a long time ago.”

I reached across the table and placed my hand on his. “No, Jax. It does matter—to me at least. Why would you try to hate me?”

Before he could reply, a voice cut us off. “Seriously, Jax?”

I looked up to see a beautiful woman standing in front of us. She had wavy brown locks of hair and deep brown eyes that matched. She was wearing nursing scrubs, and the sadness in her features pained me, even though I didn’t know who she was.

“Amanda,” Jax said, his voice stern.

She didn’t say anything, but her eyes fell to my hand resting on

Jax's and then she looked back at him.

He reluctantly pulled his hand away from mine. "Listen, Amanda—"

Slap.

It took me aback watching her hand make contact with his cheek. Jax was also stunned based on the way he shook his head in shock.

"Screw you, Jax," she said as her eyes filled with emotions. "You told me you weren't seeing anyone."

"I'm not," he said.

My hands flew to my chest. "Oh, no. We aren't—he and I—" I stuttered, unsure why I felt so nervous. *Is that what she thinks? That Jax and I are seeing one another?* "We aren't seeing each other. We are just friends."

She eyed me up and down as she crossed her arms. "Yeah right, new girl. Everybody knows Jax doesn't have friends. He doesn't know how to be a friend, the same way he didn't know how to be a boyfriend."

"Now wait a minute," I started, but Jax held a hand up.

"It's okay, Kennedy. She's right."

No, she wasn't.

I stayed quiet out of respect for Jax, but inside my blood was starting to boil. I couldn't believe how nasty this woman was being just because she saw Jax and me out with one another. It was clear they used to be in a relationship, but it was over and done with. For her to belittle him—to slap him—was completely uncalled for.

"Good luck," she told me, pushing her purse strap up her shoulder. "Don't be surprised when you try to open him up and you're hit with a cement block. He's the definition of emotionally unavailable."

She turned to him and huffed loudly. "I should've known you'd turn out to be just like your father, you heartless prick." She walked off, leaving a heaviness floating around us.

I saw the invisible knife that she'd shoved deeply into Jax's chest. His body cringed from the painfulness of her words before he looked up at me. He seemed completely deflated as his lips parted. "I think we should head out."

"Yeah, okay." I grabbed my purse, and we walked back to his truck. As we drove, I didn't close my eyes once. I couldn't stop staring at Jax, wondering what was going through his mind. I

wanted to ask, but I also didn't want to come off as needy. His knuckles were pale white as he gripped the steering wheel in front of him and his mouth twitched every now and again.

As he pulled up to my house, he turned the truck off and looked my way. "Sorry about all that."

"You did nothing wrong."

"Yeah, all right. Well, I guess I'll talk to you—"

"Do you want to keep hanging out?" I offered. "I know that was a lot back there, and I could tell she got under your skin, but we can still hang out. It's early, it's Saturday, and the weather is nice. We can sit in my parents' convertible and just talk, or not talk—whatever you want to do."

He flicked his nose with his thumb. "I feel like I want to be alone for a while, Kennedy."

"Yeah, of course. I get you wanting to be alone—truly, I do…but just be alone with me."

He hesitated for a moment, so I figured I could make the pot even sweeter.

"I have a bottle of my father's favorite whiskey that we can finish off, and believe me when I say my father only drank the good stuff."

He snickered. "It's only eleven in the morning."

"Oh. Right. Well, I also have my mother's favorite coffee beans, so we can drink the coffee this morning and tap into the whiskey tonight."

"You want to spend the whole day with me?" he asked, surprised.

"The whole day, and the whole night."

We did exactly that, too. We headed inside and drank numerous coffee beverages. I did most of the talking, which mimicked much of what our childhood was like, and Jax listened with ease. I told him more stories about my parents and Daisy and more stories about my past, and whenever I'd laugh out loud, he'd smile and look at me as if I were the sun.

We talked about our careers, and he told me how he'd planned to buy every book I've published so far.

He told me about his father's land and how he planned to make the property everything his mother dreamed of once it was passed down to him. "She was never able to achieve her dreams. I want to see them through for her," he said.

I could tell it was hard for him to talk about his mother, but I was glad he was speaking about her. If I'd learned anything over the past few weeks, it was that talking about your loved ones kept them alive, and I needed that. I was certain Jax needed that, too.

When we broke out the whiskey that night, we headed out to my parents' convertible to drink underneath the stars and the moon.

My favorite thing about sitting beside Jax was that even when it was quiet, when the conversations faded and we were left with nothing but the silence, the stillness felt healing. Being quiet with him was one of my favorite things about the moments we shared that day.

After we had a little too much to drink, Jax placed his hands behind his head and looked up toward the sky. "I don't want to be like him," he confessed. "Like my father. Amanda said that earlier, and she said it a few weeks back, too. I'm sure people in this town think I'm like him, but I don't want to be. He was a monster."

"You're not your father."

He shook his head. "You haven't known me for years. You can't really say that."

"Yes, I can."

"How so?"

"Because your character hasn't changed throughout the years. You are the same gentle boy you were before. This town, these people don't see it, though, because they are too stuck on their prejudices and judgmental ways based on a tragedy that happened years ago. What they don't see is the kindness in your eyes, the way you help people when they aren't looking, the way you give yourself to those who are in need, the way you care so quietly. You're the same beautiful soul I loved all those years before, Jax, and you are nothing like your father."

He closed his eyes. "Promise?"

I placed my hand on his thigh. "Promise."

His eyes opened quickly and fell to my hand. "Every time you do that, I feel as if I'm waking up again."

"Do what?"

"Touch me."

I swallowed hard at his words, and I wasn't sure if it was the whiskey or the swirl of emotions inside me that was making my mind spin. "I missed you, Moon," I confessed.

"I missed you more. I missed your light so damn much. I'd been

living in darkness for so long…I missed you…"

"What did you mean before when you said you tried to hate me?"

"Because you stopped writing," he explained. "I felt like when your letters stopped coming, I didn't want to care about you anymore. After I lost my mother, I needed your letters, and when they stopped, I wanted to hate you. I hated myself more, though, because I was certain you stopped writing because of what I told you about what happened to my mom. I figured you thought I was a murderer."

I gasped and my eyes narrowed. "I never received those letters from you."

"What?"

"Jax, you stopped writing me. I never received any letters about what happened to your mother, or what happened to you. I mean, hell, I kept writing you for a whole year after your letters stopped coming. I showed up to summer camp, hoping you'd be waiting there for me with answers. I would've never stopped writing you, and I would've never thought those awful things about you."

Confusion lined his features. "You wrote me?"

"Yes. I was heartbroken when your letters stopped coming." I sat up in the driver's seat and turned toward him. "I would've been there for you, Jax. I would've forced my parents to drive me to wherever you were so I could help you grieve. I would've been by your side."

"You were my sun," he said. "After your letters stopped, the world became that much darker."

I took his hands in mine and squeezed them. "I'm so sorry you went through that. I hate that you spent that time thinking I turned on you. I would never do that. You were my moon, my best friend."

He looked down at our interlaced hands. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"Anything."

"The day I realized it was you, it turned back on."

"What turned back on?"

"My heart."

22

Jax

After the drunken night in the convertible, Kennedy and I were inseparable. I began showing her all the things Havenbarrow had to offer. Oddly enough, I kind of began to enjoy the stupid-ass town, too. It was easier to find enjoyment in things when you had someone like Kennedy to experience them with.

Each day we hung out, she forced me to go to the coffee shop to greet Marshmallow—against my better judgment. That stupid cat loved on her and hissed at me. When we weren't together, I was planning our next adventures. I wanted her to see the world of Havenbarrow with me right beside her.

I spent years not having Kennedy around me, and now I was determined to make up for all the lost time.

"Favorite ice cream flavor on the count of three," Kennedy said as we sat in the woods one Sunday morning, eating granola bars and watching the birds fly by. "One, two, three!"

"Blue moon!" I shouted.

"Cherry chip!" she exclaimed. She pointed my way and gasped. "Oh my gosh! Who likes blue moon? What flavor is that anyway? Honestly, blue moon? What does that even mean?"

"It means it's a delicious ice cream that tastes like heaven. It's as if Froot Loops had a love child with cotton candy."

She laughed, and it sounded beautiful. “That sounds disgusting.”

“You’re wrong. If you tried it, you’d be just as in love with it as I am.”

“That sounds like a challenge, and I decided a long time ago that I’d never pass up ice cream challenges.”

I rose to my feet and held my hand out to her. “Come on, then. The ice cream shop in town has the best blue moon in the world. Sure, it’s the only blue moon I’ve ever had, but I’m certain it’s the best.”

She took my hand, and away we went. The night was perfect, so instead of driving into town, we chose to walk. The whole way there, Kennedy went on and on about anything and everything, and I listened to every syllable that left her mouth. When we got in line for the ice cream, I heard people around us whispering, but I didn’t think too much about it.

I couldn’t have cared less what the smallminded thought about the idea of Kennedy hanging out with me. They no longer got to define me. Only I did.

“Hi, we’ll take two cones with two scoops each of blue moon,” Kennedy said as we approached the front counter. She reached into her purse to pay, and when I went to pull out my credit card, she shoved it away. “Not this time, Moon. It’s on me.”

She paid for our ice cream, and we went back to our walk. On our way, we were stopped by the twins from Stephen King’s *The Shining*. They were wearing matching outfits. Matching fucking outfits. Honestly, what kind of grown women were out here matching their fucking outfits?

“Oh my, hi there, Kennedy,” Kate said in her singsong fake voice. She glanced over at me. “Jax.”

“Kate. Louise,” I mumbled, not the least bit interested in the conversation that was about to take place.

“Out for a little sweet treat?” Louise questioned, eyeing the cones in our hands. “That looks delicious. I might have to get me a scoop once I’m off this keto diet. Doesn’t that look delicious, Kate?”

“It looks like a carb attack if you ask me,” her sister replied. Then she turned to Kennedy. “Now, I don’t mean to pry, but there have been a lot of rumors going around town about the two of you.”

“Oh?” Kennedy asked, raising an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Why, yes it is. You’re the talk of Havenbarrow. Just like

celebrities, it seems." She giggled. *Why is she giggling?* "Now, I don't want to get into your business. If anything, Louise and I pride ourselves on staying out of other people's affairs, but is it true?"

"Is what true?" Kennedy asked.

Louise nudged her. "You know—that you two are in a relationship? Or is it just a fling? Maybe like sex buddies. Friends with benefits? I know he's doing your lawn work, so perhaps you two have grown closer during that time. I'm not prying, but I am curious if the two of you are—"

"*Woof!*"

My eyes widened as I turned to Kennedy, who was looking at the twins with wide eyes. And she…barked. Fuck me sideways, Kennedy Lost was barking at the twins, and it officially became the highlight of my life.

The look of fear on both Kate's and Louise's faces would be forever glued in my head.

Kennedy kept barking at them as they began to back up slowly, completely confused by her actions.

So I did the only thing I could think to do.

I barked at them, too.

They scurried away like the roaches they were, and I was sure the news of said barking would be revealed at the next town meeting. For some reason, that pleased me.

"I could've really used you in this town years ago," I joked.

"I'm not leaving any time soon, so I'll have to work on deepening my growls." She finally had a chance to lick at the ice cream that was beginning to melt down her hands. Her whole body froze as her eyes widened in shock. "Holy crap! That tastes like everything good in this world."

"I told you!"

"No, seriously. It's better than sex."

I narrowed my eyes. "You've been having sex with the wrong people."

She giggled, and her cheeks turned slightly red. "Whatever. All I'm saying is you were right."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Wait—I need to hear you say that again. It has a nice ring to it."

"I'm never saying those words again, so keep them in your memories."

I poked at her side. "Say it again."

“No.” She giggled, swirling away from me. “Never.” I began tickling her side, and she squeaked. “Stop it!”

“Not until you say it again.”

“Neverrrr!” she dragged out as I began tickling her more and more until she surrendered. “Okay, okay, you were right!” she exclaimed, tossing her hands up in the air, and as her hand went up, so did her ice cream cone, which she released from her grip. As everyone knows, what went up had to come down.

Right on top of my head.

Kennedy stepped back, her face red from holding in her laughter as melted blue moon dripped down my skin, making the mess of all messes all over my head.

Her hands landed on her hips as her chuckles began to slip out. “If that’s not the best form of instant karma, I don’t know what is.” She wiped my cheek with her finger where the ice cream was melting then licked it off.

And if she hadn’t been so fucking adorable and sexy as she licked her finger, I might’ve had enough nerve to be upset, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do anything but smile like a fool.

“You think you’re funny, huh?” I smirked, shaking my head and knocking the cone to the ground.

“I’m a regular comedian. It’s just funny, you know, because blue moon is currently covering Moon. It’s like you two were meant to be one. It was a part of your desti—Jax!” she screamed as I smeared my cone on top of her head. For a second, I had a moment of panic that she’d be pissed about my action, but once I saw her cheeks rise higher and heard her laughter burst into the sky, my heart beat faster and faster.

I start laughing with her, uncontrollably, to the point that my sides began to ache. What made it even funnier were the odd looks we received from everyone around us. Then, once we gathered ourselves, Kennedy looked up at me with a wide smile, placed her hands on her hips, and struck a pose.

“How do I look?”

“Sweet,” I replied. I stepped toward her and brushed my finger along her bottom lip, where ice cream was dripping. I did it without thought. My body simply moved toward hers as if there was a magnetic pull. I couldn’t step away. My eyes were fixated on her mouth as she slowly slid her tongue across her bottom lip, tasting the ice cream coating her skin.

I wanted to taste it, too. I wanted to revel in the sweetness on her lips.

Somehow I grew closer, and Kennedy's messy hands lay against my chest, resting over my messy heart. Her eyes were on me, and I wondered if she could feel it—the crazy beating that resided inside me.

"Jax…"

"Yeah?"

"Are you thinking…?"

"Yeah. And you're thinking…?"

"Uh-huh."

Within seconds, her lips were on mine, and I kissed her hard, as if I'd been waiting all these years to rediscover her mouth on mine. She tugged on my shirt, pulling me in. Everything around us went silent as I began losing myself in her kiss, in her lips, her tongue, her heartbeats.

So sweet.

So fucking sweet. I felt as if I were flying even though my feet remained on solid ground.

It was a kiss made in heaven, and I was thankful for it regardless of my past sins. I needed Kennedy Lost to come back to me. I needed her to find me after all this time. Part of me felt foolish for feeling so much after living a life where I felt nothing at all. Perhaps this was all a dream, nothing more than me losing my mind and falling into a mirage of hopeful fantasy. But I didn't care. I didn't care if it was fake or if it was real; I just knew she was the first thing in my life that made me feel alive. I kissed her as if time was running out. I kissed her for our yesterdays, and I kissed her for tomorrow. And then I kissed her again.

If she was a dream, I planned to sleep forever.

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* * *

We went back to her house that night, and she invited me in to get cleaned up. We took off our shoes in the foyer, and she led me to the bathroom. She turned on the shower and took off her clothes, leaving her bra and panties on. For a second, I thought I was back in my fucked-up snowman dream as I watched her step inside the shower.

“I figured this is the best way to get the stickiness off of our skin,” she said as my dick twitched from the sight of her.

Yup. Any second now it was going to start snowing over our heads.

She waved me over, and I suspiciously took off my clothes, too, only leaving my boxers on. The water raced over us, and I couldn’t stop staring at her. She was so fucking beautiful in every single way. The way her wet bra and panties clung to her skin made me want to rip them off of her body, but I controlled my desires.

Truthfully, just standing near her felt like a gift I didn’t deserve.

“Hands,” she said.

I held mine out toward her. She squirted shampoo into my palms and then added some to her own, and we began shampooing each other’s hair. As the sugary ice cream melted off our skin, I wanted nothing more than to push her up against the wall and slide so deep inside of her that she’d have no other option but to cry out my name.

Instead, I stayed still, taking my cues from her.

When we finished rinsing the shampoo out of our hair, she tilted her head up to look at me. Her full lips were rosy and her cheeks were high as she smiled my way.

“Basorexia?” she whispered as our lips slightly parted.

“Basorexia,” I replied.

Our lips fell together, and they stayed that way all night.

23

Jax

“You’re happy,” Joy commented as we sat on her front porch for our morning coffee. It was going to be a busy day with plumbing jobs around town, so I was thankful to take a few moments with her to ease into the day.

I was also thankful for being able to wake with Kennedy beside me in her bed. We hadn’t had sex, but we had stayed up late into the night talking and kissing and kissing some more. When she fell asleep in my arms, I knew I wouldn’t ever be able to let her go again.

I smiled over at Joy and nodded. “I am.” Her eyes watered, and I laughed. “Don’t cry, Joy.”

“Happy tears, sweetheart,” she said, patting my hand. “Just happy tears. You know, you’re like the grandson I was never able to have. You mean the world to me, and all I ever wanted was for you to be happy.”

“Thank you, Joy, for always being there for me.”

“That’s what family does, honey. We stay together through the good days and bad.”

Even though she wasn’t my blood relative, Joy Jones had been the biggest part of my family over the past few years. After Derek left, I felt very alone. If it wasn’t for her, I might’ve never made it to

the place I was today. I'd never be able to show her enough gratitude for the way she loved me even when I didn't have a clue how to love myself.

I looked down at the cup of coffee in my hands. "Part of me feels like this good feeling doesn't belong to me…as if the universe placed it on me and is going to take it back when it realizes I don't deserve it."

"If there's anyone in this world who deserves this good feeling, it's you, Jax. Don't spoil it by thinking about what could go wrong. Don't wash it away trying to figure out the ins and outs of the future. Be here now with life, because right now is all we have. Take it from this old fart—happiness stays where you allow it to be."

The sun beamed down on us as I snickered to myself and shook my head. "Is it crazy that I think I'm falling in love with her?"

"The best thing in life that we can ever do is be brave enough to love. Fall in love with her, and then don't you ever stop—although I will have an issue if you don't make it over to watch *The Bachelor* with me. That's when your love for Kennedy begins to cross the line."

I laughed until I saw the stern look on her face. The daggers Joy was shooting me were enough to scare me straight.

I was determined to never miss an episode of *The Bachelor* with her for the rest of her life. Besides, it was our tradition. I didn't have many traditions in my life; therefore, I was going to hold the ones I did have close to me.

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* * *

Ever since I'd picked Connor up for the workday, he'd been smiling from cheek to cheek, staring at me as if I'd taken home an Olympic gold medal.

"Why do you keep staring at me like that?" I asked.

"You did it, didn't you?" Connor mocked as we pulled up to our first job at Gary's Café. "You put your lime in her coconut, didn't you?!" he exclaimed, pointing a finger toward me.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I grumbled, shaking my head.

"I'm talking about you and Kennedy boning each other! I can

tell by the grimace on your face."

I cocked an eyebrow. "You can tell by my grimace that I slept with someone? That seems backward."

"It might sound that way to the average person, but I for one am trained to know the grimaces of Jax Kilter—and this is a happy grimace! Plus! You let me get in your truck and put on the top forty radio station. You hate pop music, but I swore you were humming along to Taylor Swift."

"It's catchy," I muttered.

"Holy balls, you just said Taylor Swift was catchy! The world is officially ending. So, tell me all about it."

"I'm not telling you anything about it because there's nothing to tell," I said as I put the truck into park and climbed out. I headed to the bed of my pickup and grabbed my toolkit.

Connor hurried over to me with his cell phone in his grip and shoved it in my face. "Then what is this?"

I glanced at the photograph on the page and narrowed my eyes before snatching it out of his hold. "How did you get this?" I was staring at a picture of Kennedy and me kissing on the street the previous night. What kind of low-budget paparazzi did we have in this hellish town?

"It started circulating around town last night. And to think you said nothing happened."

"Nothing did happen," I repeated. Connor gave me a *You are a damn liar* smirk, and I rolled my eyes. "Nothing that I'm telling you about, at least."

"Wow, that's harsh. I tell you everything, buddy."

"Yeah, and I kind of wish you'd stop doing that, if I'm honest."

"Whatever. You love hearing my stories. So, tell me all about it. Was it everything you thought your first time would be?" he mocked. I was this close to cussing him out—except I couldn't stop smirking like a damn fool. Connor played on my happiness, too. "Oh my gosh, I'm so proud of you, champ. I remember my first time like it was yesterday."

"It probably *was* yesterday. Besides, we didn't sleep together. We just…kissed."

He paused his footsteps and raised a confused brow. "Wait—time out. You're this happy because of just kissing a girl?"

I shrugged. "Yeah."

He shook his head in disappointment. "I expected more from

you, Jax. Come to me when you're a real man."

"Hey, Connor?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

"Okay, boss."

---

* * *

The day passed by slowly, but we didn't have any major plumbing issues to deal with, which made me happy. Nothing could ruin a day like pipes backed up with shit. After I dropped Connor off, I headed toward Dad's nursing home to check on him. Truthfully, I wasn't looking forward to seeing Amanda, because I knew if Connor had the photograph of Kennedy and me kissing, it'd probably found its way to her, too.

Right when I walked inside, the daggers Amanda shot my way made me fully aware that I was right in my assumption.

"Just a friend, huh?" she sneered, rolling her eyes as she flipped through a magazine.

I walk to the front desk, and even though I didn't feel as if I owed her an explanation about Kennedy and me, I knew she deserved it. Amanda had never been nasty while we were together. We just came from different backgrounds. We had differing beliefs. When she talked about kids, she talked about how she wanted to shape them into what she wanted them to become—doctors, athletes, politicians.

I didn't agree with that idea.

I wanted to have a kid who was happy and allowed to be whatever he wanted.

Plus, when it came to passion between Amanda and me, it was lacking. I didn't get elated when I knew I would see her. I didn't feel as if she was the person I wanted to spend forever with. I didn't see a future.

She deserved someone who looked at her as if she were every star in the sky—and unfortunately, I wasn't that guy.

"I'm sorry if hearing about Kennedy and me hurt you, Amanda. You know I would never want to do that."

She kept frowning. "Yeah, well, still hurt."

I grimaced and skimmed my hand through my hair. "Listen,

count yourself lucky. I'm an asshole. You're better off without me."

"I know that, Jax. I'm not stupid. It's just…" Her voice lowered and she shook her head. "You never did that with me."

"Did what?"

"Laughed. We never laughed together."

"Sure we did," I offered. There was no way we hadn't laughed together. We'd dated for nearly two years—there had to have been some laughter.

"No, we didn't, and you damn sure didn't look at me the way you looked at that girl. I'm sorry for slapping you, okay? I just… that's what I wanted. What you gave to her is what I wanted."

"You'll get that, Amanda. There's someone out there who will give you everything you deserve and more. You deserved more than what I gave you."

"Damn right I do." She chuckled. "Anyway, good luck."

I thanked her and headed to see Dad. Lately, when I arrived, he'd been in bed already. It wasn't a good visit, and his mumbles were about how his kid was a fuck up.

"Fuu-ck up," he said. "Ja-x fuu-ck up," he kept repeating. I tried my best to ignore it, but when it became too much, I stepped out of his room, pulled up a chair outside of his door, and waited. I'd wait until he was sleep, then I'd read to him. Amanda noticed me and frowned, but I was glad when she didn't approach me. I didn't want her comfort. Seriously, I wished Kennedy was sitting beside me to give me that electric shock.

When Dad was asleep, I went back inside the room. He was looking weaker and weaker each visit, and I knew things were on the decline. I did my best not to think about it and read him the chapters for the night. I was getting close to the end of the novel, so I began reading slower.

Funny how I could have a wonderful day then leave the nursing facility feeling drained. Normally, after my visits, I went home or to the woods. In the past, I never wanted to be alone, but that was how I felt I had to be. Recently, I didn't feel that same tug of loneliness, and if I was going to be alone, I wanted to be alone with her.

I pulled into Kennedy's driveway and put the truck into park. I headed up to her porch and rang the doorbell. When she answered, she was already in her pajamas, looking beautiful as ever.

"Hey, you." She smiled. "How was your visit with your dad?"

I shrugged. “I don’t really want to talk about it. I was just hoping I could hang out here for a bit because I didn’t want to go home tonight. My mind is moving a bit fast after seeing the shape he’s in, so I thought maybe I could crash here for a while.”

“Of course, Jax. You never have to ask.”

Before I could walk into her house, she was on the porch wrapping me in her arms, and for the first time in my life, I realized home wasn’t a place, it was a person. When I was lost that night, I ran away to Kennedy, and lucky for me, she let me in.

24

Jax
Thirteen years old

I wished Mom wasn't at work.

I wished Derek wasn't at football practice.

I wished I wasn't home alone with Dad. I hated being home alone with Dad.

"For fuck's sake. Would you stop shaking already? You're going to scare the damn thing off," Dad said from behind me. He steadied my hands on the gun. The deer lingered in front of me with its head down, eating something, maybe grass or a branch?

What do deer eat? Fruit? Berries? Do they eat as a family sometimes and carry food home with them? Or are they only supposed to look out for themselves?

"*Steady your grip*," Dad hissed against my ear. His rough voice snapped me out of my thoughts. The deer looked up and hesitated for a moment. He stretched his neck up and started chewing on a twig from a tree.

Twigs! They eat twigs!

"Look at that beauty, Jax. That's a solid white-tailed deer."

My heart pounded hard in my chest, because the deer *was* a beauty—so why would I kill it? What had that animal done to me? Nothing. It didn't look like it did anything to anyone. I looked up to

Dad and saw how proud he seemed. I couldn't think of the last time he looked proud around me, and I didn't want to let him down.

Dad said real men go hunting, and I wanted to be a real man like him. Derek was off at football practice and Mom was working late at the diner, so it was just Dad and me at home in our woods. I wasn't even sure we were allowed to hunt in June, but Dad told me it was his land so he was allowed to do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

My eyes focused in on the deer. It was becoming harder and harder for me to breathe. It felt like someone had put their hand in my chest, grabbed my heart, and promised to only let go if I made a choice.

Be a man or be a pussy.

The animal stood there, minding its own business as I stalked it in the shadows made by the bushes.

"I don't want to," I whispered, my shaking returning. It wasn't *fair*. The deer hadn't *done* anything. We had food in our house. We didn't need it. We weren't hungry. I wasn't hungry. I wasn't hungry… "Please no," I softly said again, maybe to myself, maybe to God.

"Come on. Derek killed three all on his own last year. If you don't do it, you can be damn sure you're not going to camp later this week. Don't be a little shit," Dad said, threatening me with the one thing he knew would hurt me. I didn't want to miss camp with Kennedy. I'd been waiting all year for it.

When the deer looked back down to the ground to find more twigs, I lowered my gun. I didn't know if Dad saw it, but right behind the whitetail was a baby deer. Her doe eyes were wide, and she looked scared. My eyes filled with tears. *I can't do it.*

"Fuckin' A, Jax," Dad said before lowering himself to the ground with his gun that was twice as big as mine, if not three times bigger. He zoned in on the deer. I felt my stomach flip and a nasty taste of vomit settled in my throat. I did my best to push it back down, swallowing hard. I stood and almost lost my balance from standing too fast. My eyes locked with the baby deer who seemed to be invisible to my dad. I shook my head back and forth.

I can't!

I can't let it happen! I can't let the deer die!

In a panic, I started waving my arms and shouting. "No! Run! *Run*!" I screamed, the back of my throat feeling strained and sore.

The deer looked alarmed and started to move. I jumped up and down, trying to flag it to run and never look back, but it was too late. Dad's gun fired and the deer only made it a few feet before it fell over to the ground.

My eyes moved to where the baby deer was standing a few minutes ago. She was gone, now.

"What the hell, kid?" Dad yelled at me. He stood and slapped me on the back of my head. "Pack up your shit and wait here." I listened to him mutter under his breath about me.

He walked toward the deer.

The *dead* deer.

The dead deer that *Dad* killed.

I bent over and proceeded to throw up my breakfast and lunch, and probably some of last night's dinner. I hated this. I hated hunting. I hated the deer for being stupid and not running fast enough. I hated Derek for being better than me. I hated Mom for not being home when Dad dragged me to the woods. I hated Dad for not liking me the way I was. I hated myself for letting him down.

Maybe I hated myself a little more than anything else.

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* * *

"You shouldn't have made him do that," Mom scolded later at the house as I wrapped my arms around the top of the staircase. She and Dad stood in the living room pacing back and forth. They'd been fighting about me for the past hour. Mom had come home and found me crying into my pillow, and she'd embraced me tightly, telling me everything would be okay.

"It's a damn shame that he's like this! His brother shot his first deer when he was much younger than Jax!"

"But he's not Jax," she swore. "Jax is different. He's sensitive."

"He's a sissy."

"Don't talk about my son like that," she ordered with a very stern voice.

"Oh, so now he's your son?" Dad shot back.

"He is when you treat him like this." Mom's voice cracked and she crossed her arms, looking down at the carpet. "You know what I mean, Cole."

“No, I don’t think I do.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s funny, Derek isn’t even my son by blood, but he feels more like mine than my own damn kid.”

“Don’t say things like that. Plus, it’s different. Derek is way older than Jax. That’s not a fair comparison.”

Dad grumbled something I couldn’t hear then pushed his hands through his hair. “Unless you want to make him more of a bitch than he already is, let me handle raising the boy to be a boy. He’s a pussy because you keep babying him, Elizabeth. This is your doing.”

“I’m not going to do this. I’m not going to listen to you talk down about Jax because he doesn’t take up the same hobbies as you.”

“His head is always in a book! He cries over fucking fishing because he thinks the fish is being harmed! I mean, fuck, he cried during *The Lion King* last week because Mufasa fucking died! Boys don’t cry over *The Lion King*. He’s a weak little shit, and you’re lucky I’m here to man him up.”

“He doesn’t need to man up. He’s perfect the way he is.”

“No. He’s weak. You’re weakening him. Just watch—watch him never achieve anything because of your mothering. You’re ruining him.”

They kept fighting, and I felt awful about it. A knot settled in my stomach. I headed back to my bedroom and cried into my pillow some more.

“Stop crying, loser,” I sobbed to myself. “Just be a man.”

Mom and Dad fought more and more about me. They never fought about my older brother, maybe because he was more like Dad. Maybe it was because he was good at sports, maybe because he was strong.

Strong.

I wanted to be strong. I *needed* to be strong.

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* * *

“You okay, sweetheart?” Mom asked, peering into my bedroom. It was already past my bedtime, but I couldn’t sleep. My head and heart hurt too much to sleep that night.

“He hates me,” I whispered.

Mom walked over to me and crawled into bed beside me. She wrapped her arms around my body and held me close to her. “Your father doesn’t hate you, Jax. He’s just…” She took a deep breath. “He was raised differently, that’s all. He thinks certain things make a person a man, but he’s wrong.”

“I’m not a man.”

“You’re right, you’re not.” She leaned forward and kissed my nose. “You’re a handsome boy who’s just learning about yourself, that’s all.”

“But I want to be strong like Dad and Derek. I want to be better than me.”

“Strong? Jax Kilter, you’re the strongest boy I know,” she promised, nuzzling her nose to mine. “You know what makes you strong?”

“What?”

“Your heartbeats. The way you love animals and don’t want anything bad to happen to them. The way you say please and thank you. The way you hold doors open for people. The way you laugh out loud when reading a funny book and reread the parts out loud so I can laugh, too. The way you share your favorite jokes with me. The way you love your mama.” She smiled. “You might be the strongest boy I’ve ever known, and one day you’re going to be the strongest man, too. Don’t let your father get to you. You’re not any less of a man just because you aren’t like him or your brother.”

I wanted to believe her, but it was hard.

“Do you know you’re my best friend, Jax?” she asked.

I knew. I figured she just said it because she had to, but she was my best friend, too.

Mom was my only friend, other than Kennedy. She was always looking out for me, even when I knew she wasn’t. No matter what, Mom was always there for me.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, Jax. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“What would you think if you, Derek, and me got our own place?”

My eyes widened. “Without Dad there?”

She frowned and nodded her head. I saw tears fill her eyes. “Yeah. I think it would be good for us. I’m getting my landscaping business up and running soon, and you can be my righthand man to

help me out. We can start a new life without your father. Of course, he'd always be in your life, Jax, but we'd just have our own place to stay."

"You're leaving Cole?"

I looked up to see Derek standing in the doorway with panic in his eyes.

Mom stood from the bed and walked over to him. "Derek, nothing has been decided yet and—"

"You can't leave him! You can't do this. I already lost a dad, and you can't make me do it again. I'm not going. I'm staying here with Cole."

"Calm down, Derek. Nothing has been deci—"

"It's because of him, isn't it?" he asked, gesturing toward me. "It's because he's a freak. I know that's why you and Cole fight all the time."

"Derek!" Mom hissed. "Don't you dare speak about your brother like that!"

"Why not? You know it's true. You treat him like he's not a weirdo when he is. Cole's right—he is a little bitch."

Mom gripped Derek by the arm, not tightly, but firmly. "Apologize to your brother right now."

"Why? I'm just telling the truth."

"Derek," she scolded, but he didn't let up. Mom dropped her hold on his arm and pointed out the door. "Go to your bedroom, and don't for a second think about going to football practice for the rest of the week. You're grounded."

"What? No way! We have a game on Friday, and if I'm not at practices, I can't play." He groaned as his face reddened in anger.

"You should have thought about that before speaking about your brother that way."

"This fucking sucks," he muttered, stomping away in irritation.

"Make that two weeks!" Mom hollered. Shortly after that, Derek's bedroom door slammed shut.

Mom sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"He's right," I said. "It's all because of me."

Mom walked over to me, bent down so we were eye to eye, and placed her hands on my cheeks. "Jaxson Eli Kilter, none of this—and I mean none—has anything to do with you. Your father and your brother are wrong. You are perfect the way you are. Now get some rest." She kissed my forehead and tucked me in. She walked

away and was about to shut off the light, but I called out.

"Leave it on?" I asked, feeling stupid for still being afraid of the dark.

"Night light," she said, gesturing toward the wall. "Remember? It's never dark with your night light."

I nodded slowly. "But keep the door open?" I asked.

"Will do, baby," she promised. She shut off the light.

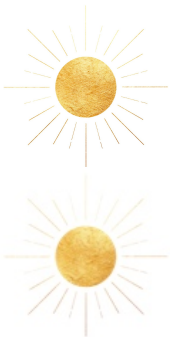
I tried my best to remember what Mom had told me, but it was hard. Dad hadn't spoken to me in days, since I refused to shoot the deer. The last thing he'd called me was a pansy before he stopped talking to me.

Whenever I walked into a room, Dad walked out. Whenever I said hi, his mouth stayed shut. Whenever I did anything, he made me feel invisible.

Invisible.

I'm invisible.

25



Kennedy
Present day

“Do you want to go on an adventure today?” Jax asked as we lay in bed together. The night before when he’d come to my place, I could tell his energy was all over the place from visiting his father. He didn’t want to talk about it, though, so I didn’t push it. We kept things simple, and when we went to bed, he seemed calmer than he had when he’d arrived. I was thankful for that. I’d do anything to calm his troubled mind.

“I’m always down for an adventure,” I replied, shifting around in the bed. How had we gotten here so fast? One day, we were rebuilding a friendship, and the next he was lying shirtless in my bed. I guessed you could say our friendship had evolved over time.

I liked this version of us the most—the grown-up, imperfect version of our story.

“What did you have in mind?” I asked.

“I saw you had the hidden room at the library on your list of things to see. Now, to be clear, that seems to be an urban legend of the greatest extremes. I am ninety-nine percent sure it doesn’t exist.”

“I’m all about that one percent chance,” I said, rubbing my

hands together.

"Then let's do it. I'm going to go shower, then I have my coffee with Joy. There are a few job sites Connor and I have to tackle, but after that, I'm free. We can head over to the library around five this afternoon if you want?"

"Sounds good to me."

Before he left, he kissed me goodbye, and the butterflies that hit me almost sent me backward. I was prepared to ride a wave of happiness for the remainder of the day—then my phone started ringing and Penn's name appeared on the screen.

He hadn't called me once since I'd left. He hadn't said a word to me, except for the few text messages that said he missed me. Now he was calling me, and I didn't know what to do, so I let it go to voicemail.

When it began to ring again, my stomach knotted up, and I swallowed hard, answering it just in case something was seriously wrong.

"Hello?" I said.

"Kennedy, hey. How are you?" he asked. He seemed calm as ever, which was concerning after the way he'd handled our relationship before.

"How am I?" I asked, confused. "What do you want, Penn?"

"I, uh, I guess I deserve that tone after the way I handled things between us. I could've dealt with everything a little bit better."

I huffed. "You don't say. Why are you calling?"

"To tell you to come home now. It's been a few weeks, and I could really use you back here, Kennedy. I miss you. People are asking about you. They're noticing you aren't around."

"Isn't that what you wanted? Didn't you want me to stop making scenes in front of people?"

"You were grieving…and I get that. I mean, hell, I was grieving, too, and I didn't handle anything well. I've been thinking about going to therapy, you know, to work on my anger issues…to help fix our marriage."

"We don't have a marriage, Penn. You kicked me out. You threw money at me like I was a pathetic whore. You said you wished I had an abortion. I want nothing to do with you ever again."

"Baby," he said, sniffling. *Is he crying? Seriously?* I hadn't heard Penn cry a single tear since the accident. "I need you. Remember that dinner we went to the night everything went sideways?

Remember that older lady, Laura Smith?"

The one who'd told me to run? Yes, I remembered her. "What about her?"

"Well, she's looking to purchase some big property, and I mean big, Kennedy—the kind of money that would change our lives forever."

"You mean your life, Penn. It would change your life."

He went quiet for a moment. "Yeah, I mean…it's an amazing opportunity."

Had he called me to gloat? To tell me how wonderfully things were going for him? Because I wasn't interested in hearing it, that was for sure.

"Good for you. Listen, if you don't have anything else to say—"

"She won't work with me without you," he cut in.

"What?"

"She said the only way she'll make a deal with me is if she gets to have a dinner out with you."

I laughed out loud. "Are you joking?"

"No. Those were her guidelines. I don't know why. I don't get why she'd want to meet with you. You don't seem important enough for anything she could need."

And there it was.

One of Penn's trademark backhanded insults that later he'd call me too emotional for getting offended by.

"Goodbye, Penn."

"Wait, Kennedy, dammit!" He groaned into the phone. "Why do you have to be so difficult all the time? I've been nothing but a goddamn saint to you after you killed my little girl, and this is how you repay me? This is—"

I hung up.

His words sent chills down my spine as my phone slipped from my hand and hit the floor.

You killed my little girl.

That knife dug deep into my core and twisted inside me. He hadn't called me because he missed me. He'd called because he needed me. He'd called because without me, he would lose out on a huge profit. It had nothing to do with his love for me. He didn't truly want me to come home to him. He wanted to use me then toss me out like an old rag doll.

A stupid part of me had almost believed his words. Therapy?

Yeah right. The moment I'd mentioned to Penn that I was thinking about going to therapy after the accident, he had told me it was a waste of my time. He said therapists were frauds who didn't help people get better, just stole their money, and now he was going to therapy to fix himself? To fix his issues?

Words—that was all he was giving me. Empty, meaningless words to try to pull me back into his web of destruction. Truthfully, I was tired of it all. I was tired of him belittling me, tired of him hurting me.

A part of me figured Laura had told Penn that to work as karma. She knew I would be gone and that he therefore had no way of getting a commission from her. It felt like a slight 'girl power' moment, and I wished I could've hugged her for it.

My phone began ringing again, and Penn's name popped up against the screen again.

I picked it up and blocked it.

I had nothing else to say to the man who'd made me feel so small during the hardest days of my life. Laura was right—that is not how a husband is meant to treat his wife.

I was never going to allow a man to treat me that way again.

* * *

"I miss you and want to come home," Yoana said, just seconds after I called her. It had been a few days since we'd last talked because she and Nathan were hiking in South America with little reception. I gave her a quick update on life in Havenbarrow, the magic that was blue moon, and every detail about Jax Kilter, along with my phone call from Penn.

"I miss you too, but you'll be back in about a month or so, and then we can find our new normal."

"With your new boyfriend slash old best boyfriend," she cooed, making me laugh.

"He's not my boyfriend. He's just a boy who's a friend," I said, sounding so much like I had when we were kids and Yoana would mock me about my connection with Jax. "Besides, I'm still legally married to Penn."

"Screw him, the asshole. I can't believe he tried to drag you back into his life to make a deal. I'm a million percent certain he

was planning on kicking you to the curb the moment he got his money. He's a loser who doesn't deserve you, but it sounds like this Jax guy does. So let's talk more about him."

Just thinking about Jax set my cheeks on fire. He was so gentle with me, and kind. He listened to my hopes and dreams, he allowed me to talk about Daisy, and when I needed to cry, he didn't call me emotional. He didn't tell me I was too much.

He listened, he consoled me, and he wiped away my tears.

Even before Daisy passed away, Penn had always undermined my emotions. Jax allowed them to soar and never seemed overwhelmed by anything I felt. That was freeing to me. When someone allows you to fully be who you are, you owe them all of your love.

"He's really wonderful, Yoana. He went through some trauma when he was younger, so it's nice to talk to someone who understands what it's like to carry the guilt of an accident."

She went quiet for a second, and I knew she was thinking something important.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"Yoana, I know you the same way you know me—inside out. So, what's the problem?"

"I just want to make sure Jax is whole, you know? I don't want you to fall too quickly for someone who's broken too."

Broken too.

She thought I was broken. I didn't know what to say to that.

"You really think I'm broken?" I asked, my voice shaky as a pit of nerves swarmed inside me.

"No, no! Not like that, Kenny. I just mean you've been through a lot. I don't want you to feel as if you need to be drawn to someone else who has baggage." The more she talked about it, the more she left me feeling uneasy. She sighed. "This isn't coming out right."

"No, it's not. It's odd, too, seeing how seconds ago you were just cooing over the idea of calling Jax my boyfriend."

"That was before I knew he went through a major trauma. Look, I'm not trying to stop your happiness. If anyone in this world deserves it, it's you. I'm just being a big sister, that's all. It's my job to protect you. All I'm saying is be careful with your heart. It's been through a lot, and I don't want you to get hurt again."

Just like my previous call with Penn, I was being left with a

nasty taste in my mouth. Here I was, finally finding my footing after so much struggle, and now my sister was telling me to slow down my speed toward happiness.

I didn't want to hear that.

"I hear you, Yoana. I do. I think I'm going to go take a walk to clear my head a little. Today's already feeling heavy."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to add any stress, I swear."

"It's okay. You love me and are just looking out for my best interests, and I get it. I'd do the same for you, too. We'll talk soon. Keep enjoying your trip!"

"Will do. I love you."

"Love you too."

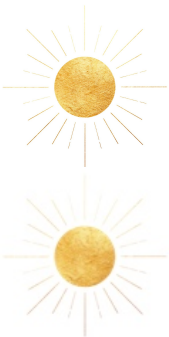
After I hung up, I tossed on a pair of tennis shoes, headed out to the woods, and reminded myself how to breathe as I tried to stop overthinking Yoana's words. What if she was right? What if falling for Jax so quickly was me setting myself up for yet another trap? I'd fallen for Penn fast. Everything about us had been a whirlwind, and the idea of going through that kind of pain again felt like too much.

What if Jax hurt me? It was clear that even his therapist, Eddie, was worried about his well-being and how he was dealing with the health struggles of his father. What if once he passed away, Jax snapped? What if he pushed me away? What if I needed him and he wasn't able to catch me before I fell?

Was I being naïve to think our relationship was on its way to a world of happily ever after? I mean, heck, we weren't even officially in a relationship.

I sat outside and listened to the birds for a few hours, hoping they'd give me some answers, praying they'd share a few secrets of healing with me.

26



Kennedy

“You have keys to the library?” I asked Jax as he flipped through the set of keys in his hand. We stood on the top step to get into what seemed to be a very closed library. The sign read loud and clear that the hours were nine to five. Surely Jax knew this fact.

“I do tonight,” he said, finding the right key and unlocking the door in front of us. As he opened it, I stood still.

“What’s happening right now?” I asked. “Are we breaking and entering?”

He chuckled that deep, manly laugh that I loved from him. “No. The guy who runs the library, Hunter, allowed me to put in a request to have it for the night.”

“You requested a library? Are you telling me there’s a way to rent out libraries, because I’d like to sign up for that on a daily basis.”

“Not on the regular occasion, but Hunter owed me a favor.”

“What kind of occasion warrants you a whole library?”

He scrunched up his nose and scratched at the back of his neck. “I was working a plumbing job a while back, found a pair of lace panties shoved deep into his toilet drain.”

“Okay?” I asked, not following the odd story.

“A size extra-large pair of panties, and let’s just say his size extra-small wife was not the owner of them. Plus, she was gone on a business trip the week before the panty issue.”

“Oh, what a dog!”

“Yup, but he begged me not to tell—not that I would. Other people’s business is none of my concern. As long as his check cleared, I was good. Today when I asked him for his keys to have the library for the night, and he said no. I said lace panties, and he handed them over.”

I laughed. “You blackmailed him with panties?”

“Sure did.”

I shivered at the thought of Jax having to deal with a stranger’s panties. “I bet you see a lot of weird things with your job.”

“Don’t even get me started on the anal beads.”

My eyes widened. “What?!”

He snickered to himself and shook his head. “Never mind. Let’s go.”

We walked into the library, and in an instant, I was in heaven. Jax locked the door behind us so no one else could get in. If I ever had to be locked away somewhere, I prayed it would be a library. I’d never run out of adventures.

“I figured it would be easier to search the library for the hidden room if no one else was here. Plus, now we can be wild and ignore the no talking rules.”

“Aren’t you the biggest rebel?”

“What can I say? Bad to the bone.”

This was so exciting to me, and I loved that Jax had gone the extra mile to make what some people would think was a lame evening even more special. At the front checkout desk was a basket filled with snacks and two spill-proof wine tumblers which were hopefully filled with happiness.

“Joy sent us a bottle of white wine. She said you really liked this certain type. Also, I attempted to make a chicken potpie, which is a million times easier said than done. Joy helped me with that, too.”

My eyes widened. “That’s my favorite meal.”

“Yeah, I know—at least, I knew it used to be. I was reading through the old letters you sent me and—”

“You still have our letters?”

He grew sheepishly shy, crossed his arms, and shrugged. “Yeah. I know that’s probably stupid, but they meant a lot to me. When I

was younger, on some of my hardest days, I'd go back and read those letters. They got me through some heavy stuff."

Without thought, I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him into my body. I needed to feel him against me, to remind myself that this was real, that we were real. I knew what Yoana was worried about, and I loved her for her concern, but Jax was the one designed for me. He wasn't the villain of my fairy tale; he was the broken hero, the one who wasn't meant to save me, but who was meant to save himself, and he was doing that. Day in and day out, he put in the work to better himself, which was so inspiring to me, and he made me want to do the same for myself. I didn't want Jax to fix me—that was my own job. That said, I did want to be inspired by his growth to see that I, too, could grow, could heal, could come out of my current situation and find happiness on the other side.

"You make me want to get better," I whispered as his strong arms held me close.

He planted a kiss on my forehead. "You're making me better," he replied.

We decided to eat dinner and drink all the wine before getting to work in the library. There were so many books to try to pull in order to unlock the secret passage to a hidden room, and there was a good chance we'd be there all night long.

I didn't mind that one bit. Being locked in the library with Jax Kilter—I could've thought of worse ways to spend a night.

We invented a game where we'd go to different parts of the library and pull random books to read passages from. Anyone else in the world might've thought we were nerds for this, but honestly, it was the most fun I'd had in a long time. Having a big, strong—and slightly tipsy—man read excerpts from *The Odyssey* was much more of a turn-on than one would think.

The way words rolled off Jax's tongue sent chills down my spine. I could have listened to him read to me for the rest of my life, and still it wouldn't have been enough of his words.

"Pull a book and flip to page ninety-four. Read the fourth paragraph," he ordered for our sixteenth round of the game.

I pulled out a novel entitled *Midnight Mansion* by Graham Russell, the great horror author, and began to read. "'His hands were soaked in gasoline, and his breath was coated with an aged whiskey that no longer burned on the way down. He'd been

drinking for days, yet still, it only felt like hours. The loneliness of the passing weeks ticked by as he rustled through the old photographs of the woman he loved who was now a named killer. He wondered to himself how he could've loved someone so dark, but realization settled in that the darkest people were the most fun to be infatuated with. He craved disappointment, and Leslie always gave it to him.'"

Gosh.

I missed writing. Whenever I read strong words, I wanted to fall back into them.

"My turn," Jax said from across the way.

"Okay, pull a book, page one hundred and four, paragraph five."

He cleared his throat and began reading. "'Iris, don't let go,' Harry begged, pulling on her tattered T-shirt. 'If you go now, I'll be here alone. I don't know how to get back to town. I don't know when or where I'm supposed to go. I don't know how to breathe unless you are guiding me. This place is filled with war, and you are my peace. So, please, don't let me go.'"

My heart leaped into my throat, and I turned to my left to see Jax standing there with a book in his hand, and not just any book. My book.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"It was on the shelves."

I shook my head. "I doubt it was on the shelves."

"I might've put it there," he replied. He walked over to me and took my hand in his. "You're an amazing author, Kennedy."

I snickered. "You can't know that from one paragraph."

"I know," he agreed. "That's why I read them all."

"You…" I breathed out slowly. "You've read my book?"

"I did. It's powerful and moving, like you. You are powerful and moving."

"Jax…" Before I could finish my thought, Jax moved to the wall a few shelves away from me, pulled out a certain novel, and lo and behold, the hidden room opened. It was filled with more shelves of books, a beautiful lounge couch, and an oversized chair and ottoman. I could've spent the rest of my life in that room and been okay.

I laughed. "You knew where it was this whole time?"

"Guilty as charged."

I wanted to smack his arm, but more than that, I wanted to kiss

him. I wanted to pull him into the beautifully hidden nook, fall onto his body, and kiss him hard and long. As I stared into the room, I began to turn to speak to Jax, and he was right there. He was in front of me, staring down at me as if I were something he wanted to ravish before the end of the night.

"If it's okay with you, I think I'm done reading for tonight," I whispered as I trailed a finger down his chest.

"Do you want to leave?" he asked as his stare lingered on my lips. When he looked back up at me, his eyes were dilated, and the want I was feeling was completely seen within him.

"No," I said on an exhalation.

He moved in closer and rested his forehead on mine. "You want to go into the nook with me, Sun?"

"Yes."

"You want to kiss me inside the nook, Sun?"

"Yes." *Yes, yes, yes…*

"You want to take off our clothes inside there, Sun?" he said softly against my lips before sucking on the bottom one.

"Please, Jax," I begged, moaning into his mouth as desire began to fill me up inside. He lifted me up and carried me into the room. He pinned me against a bookshelf and kissed me as if he'd been waiting all night for his lips to be pressed to mine. My legs were wrapped around his waist as I felt his want pressed against me. His mouth roamed down my neck, and I moaned as I placed my hands on the shelves beside me to balance myself. Jax's groans against my skin sent a pool of heat to my core as I began grinding my hips against his jeans.

Eventually he placed me on the floor and began to undress down to his boxers. I began to do the same, tossing off my clothes. As he approached me, his eyes were fixated on my red panties, and he dragged his teeth along his bottom lip. "Fucking beautiful," he mumbled.

He hooked his fingers in the edge of the lace and pulled them down before leading me toward the oversized chair. "Sit," he commanded, and geez, I liked that. I liked his commands.

I sat, and he lowered himself to the ground in front of me. He kneeled before me and looked up at me as if I were a queen and he was there to bow. He spread my legs, and the desire I had for him that night shot through the roof. I wanted him to taste me, lick me, tease me, and he did exactly that.

As he moved in closer to my core, he began kissing and licking and fucking my inner thighs with his mouth. The anticipation was killing me as I placed my hands on the armrests and dug my nails into the fabric.

When Jax made his way to my core, his wet tongue lashed me, lapping me up and down as I moaned in pleasure.

"You taste so good, Kennedy…you taste like everything I've ever fucking wanted," he swore. He placed his hands beneath my ass cheeks and lifted my hips so he could drive his tongue into me deeper. He wasn't only fucking me to the point of orgasm; he was making love to my needs, too. He was focused and dedicated to the needs that I had.

Jax lifted one of my legs on top of his shoulder and went to work. His tongue sucked on my clit before he slid two fingers deep inside me. As his tongue moved, his fingers danced, bringing me closer and closer to climax.

"Yes, please," I begged, "Keep…going…Jax, I'm going to…" I hadn't known, hadn't known it could feel so good. I hadn't known a man could ravish a woman as if she were his queen and his sole purpose was to please her in every way possible.

I couldn't stop the shaking that overtook my whole body. As he fingered me and made love to me with his tongue, I was unable to stop the fierce orgasm that flooded my entire system.

"I love that, Sun." He groaned in pleasure, still licking up my excitement. "I love how you taste on my tongue."

I couldn't even form full sentences anymore. I couldn't find the words to connect in my mind to tell him what I wanted next, what I needed next. So, I stuttered out the only three words I could muster up.

"Fuck me, Jax," I said breathlessly, and his eyes locked with mine.

"Yeah?"

"Please," I begged, needing to know what it felt like to have him inside me.

He reached for his wallet in his jeans and pulled out a condom.

As he stood, he slid off his boxers, his hardness was revealed, and I was pretty certain I gasped at the size. As he slid the condom down his shaft, and I watched, I almost came all over again from the sinful sight of him stroking himself.

He held a hand out to me, lifted me from the chair, and moved

me over to the couch.

As he positioned himself over me, he paused as his hardness lightly rubbed my core. “I want this forever,” he confessed, his voice low and somewhat shaky. His dilated eyes locked with mine as he began sliding into me. His lips parted as he lowered his mouth to mine. “I want you forever.”

“Yours,” I promised, wanting to cry out in pleasure from the feeling of him giving me every piece of him. “I’m yours.”

He began making love to me right there in the hidden room of the library. He rocked into me with no regrets. He fucked me with purpose. I felt all of him, too. I felt his light and his darkness, his happy and his sad, his forever and his always as he slid in and out of me with a rhythm that matched my heartbeats. Jax made love to me amidst thousands of novels, and I knew none of their stories were ever going to top the one we were creating within ourselves.

There was something so powerful about making love to your best friend.

And when we finished making love?

We did it again.

27

Kennedy

I started writing again.

It was nothing to tell the world about, and everything I scribbled might have been gibberish, but those words were mine, and I'd never been so thankful for being able to create. Each day, I headed to the library to write in the hidden nook. I'd stay there until the sun went down, typing away at words that were coming at me faster than my fingers could move.

I'd forgotten what it felt like to feel inspired, to be unable to focus on anything around me for a few hours a day.

When I wasn't writing, I was spending time with Jax, as much time as I could. It felt as if I couldn't get enough of being around him. So, when he told me that he was heading to Chicago to visit his brother, my heart deflated a little bit. The idea of not having him around over the weekend was a lot to take in, which felt silly. A few weeks back, he wasn't even a spot in my life. Now, the idea of him not being around was sad.

"It's just a weekend," he smirked as we sat in the convertible. "I promise to come back."

"You better. Or I'll find you again, like I did in this town," I joked. "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

“I wouldn’t want to get rid of you. I am looking forward to seeing my brother, though. We only get together once a year, for our mother’s birthday.”

I frowned. “That has to be hard.” I remembered how hard it was for my loved ones birthdays to come around.

“It was at first, but over time, it gets better, Kennedy.” He placed his hand in mine and squeezed. “It will get better and easier for you.”

That comfort was nice to have.

“My brother refuses to come back to this town to visit, though, so I always have to head up to Chicago. It might be different after our father passes away. I have a feeling that was why he ran away after our mother died. Or maybe it’s too hard to be in this town after the accident. Who knows? But for now, I’m okay getting away from Havenbarrow to see him.”

“Are you two close?”

He snickered. “Not like you and Yoana,” he replied. “But we’re fine. He’s my brother, and I know if I ever needed something, he’d be there for me.”

There was so much comfort in that fact.

He glanced at his cell phone and grimaced. “I should actually get back to my place and pack, seeing how I leave so early in the morning.”

“Oh, okay,” I nodded as I hopped out of the truck. “Maybe I can come over to help you pack. Or, well, watch you pack. Or…I don’t know…” *I just want to be near you.*

He smiled. “You’re really going to miss me, huh?”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever, Jax. Don’t’ make it a thing.”

“It’s already a thing. I’d love your help packing, though. I’d also love if you stayed the night with me. I want to be able to kiss you when the sun comes up before I go.”

That was the easiest request I’d ever fulfilled.

We walked through the woods to get to his house, and it was at that moment I realized I’d never been inside Jax’s place. I’d never seen where he lived, where his father used to live. Oddly enough, I was equal parts excited and nervous to step foot into the place where he grew up. I knew a lot of terrible things happened in that house. Yet, I liked to believe a lot of loving memories lived there, too.

As we walked inside, and he showed me around, my chest

tightened. There were all the pieces that made a house a home. The furniture was lived in. There were photographs of his family throughout the space. On one doorway frame, there were markings showcasing Derek's and Jax's height growth. I ran my fingers across those and couldn't help but smile. What a special memory to have.

Sadly, with the splashes of light, came the darkness. My hands landed against a wall that had a hole through it. It looked as if someone had punched their fist right through the drywall. Those types of holes were seen throughout the house.

When Jax caught me touching one of the spots, he cleared his throat. "Those are my memories with my father."

"Why didn't you fix them?"

His mouth twitched as he stuffed his hands into his pockets. "I didn't want to forget the way he was. It sounds stupid and petty, but I didn't want his declining health to be a reason for me to forgive him for the hurt that he caused me. So, I left the holes as reminders."

"How many times did he miss the wall and hurt you?"

He went silent.

That made me want to cry.

"I'm so, so sorry, Jax." It took a certain kind of monster to lay their hands against a child. Jax didn't deserve that treatment. No child in the whole world deserved to be hurt by the ones who were supposed to protect their lives.

He shrugged. "It was a long time ago."

"Still," I said, "I'm sorry."

He gave me a halfhearted smile before leading me to his bedroom to pack a suitcase.

When I entered the room, I froze as I saw two large, open boxes sitting on his desk. "What is that?" I asked, rushing over to see what was inside of them, even though I was already certain I knew.

He glanced over and turned a bit sheepish. "You weren't supposed to see that."

"But I did." I dug through the boxes and shook my head as a small laugh left my lips. "I know you said you bought one of my books for the library, but it seems you brought all five of my books," I said, stunned. "Five times over!"

"I wanted to support you."

I laughed. "One book would've been effective."

"What if I accidentally spilled something on said book? I wanted

to have a few backups. One day, I'm going to build a library with all of your books on the shelves."

He was the sweetest man I'd ever crossed paths with, and I was so thankful he was back in my life. "By the way things are going, these are going to be the only books I have," I joked.

He shook his head, extremely certain of the opposite. "You'll get there, Kennedy. One day at a time."

I hoped he was right.

That night we made love, and then fell asleep in each other's arms. When morning came, I wasn't ready to say goodbye. As we stood in front of his truck, guilt filled me up inside.

"I'm sorry I can't drive you to the airport. I wish I was better than this. I wish I didn't have all of my issues." What was wrong with me? I should've been able to do it. I should've been able to get into the truck and take him to the airport, like a normal person. I wished I could've been my old, normal self again.

He leaned in and kissed my lips and then my forehead. "You'll get there, Kennedy," he repeated like the previous night about my novels. "One day at a time."

When he drove off, I already began to miss him, and I selfishly started counting down the hours until he'd be back.

28

Jax

There was no way to get around the fact that my brother Derek was very well off. He was a successful businessman who worked his ass off throughout the years to climb the corporate ladder. If you'd asked me what he did exactly, I'd shrug the hell out of my shoulders, but I knew he made a good living doing it.

As he pulled up to the Chicago O'hare International Airport to pick me up in his BMW, I was reminded just how well he'd been doing.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite little brother," Derek smirked, hopping out of his car. He walked over to me, placed his hands on my shoulders, and shook his head. "You're looking bigger than the last time I saw you. You're going to make me have to get in the gym and start pumping some iron."

"If you did that, you might not fit into your designer suits anymore," I joked.

"That's what tailors and alterations are for, brother."

He pulled me into a hug, and I'd be a liar if I said it didn't feel good. It always felt good to touch down in Chicago to see Derek. Sometimes, it felt like I was seeing Mom, too, looking at his face. She would've been so proud of the man he'd become.

After we broke up our hug, I was shocked when a woman

climbed out of the passenger seat of his car. She was a very pretty girl with the brightest smile I'd ever seen—other than Kennedy's. That was a first for my trips to visit Derek. It was no secret that my brother had a bit of a playboy persona. He'd slept with a lot of women, but he never let them stick around to ride in his BMW.

And he definitely didn't have them come with him to pick me up from the airport.

"Hi, there!" She smiled. "I'm Stacey. Derek's—"

"Fiancée," Derek jumped in. Stacey giggled and nudged Derek in the side. "You're supposed to let me say it!"

"Sorry, I can't get enough of saying it out loud," he said, kissing her forehead.

"Fiancée?" I asked, trying my best not to sound surprised. "I didn't know there was even a girlfriend."

"Yes, well, it's been a bit of a whirlwind," Stacey grinned. "We've only been talking for about two months, and last night bam! Proposal!"

Color me stunned.

"You know what they say, when you know, you know," Derek said, kissing the girl's forehead again. They both seemed smitten as hell. Happiness looked good on Derek. Sometimes it seemed that he struggled to find his way in life apart from working. There were times when his mind would get so dark, but he refused to let anyone in. He said therapy wasn't for him, but he was glad it worked for me. Still, I wished he would talk to someone. It couldn't hurt.

"Congratulations!" I said, holding my hand out toward Stacey to shake.

"Oh no, sweetheart, I'm a hugger," she said, pulling me in close. As she squeezed me to death, I looked to my brother who was grinning ear to ear at her as if she were his sun.

Good for them.

"Now, don't worry. I won't be in your hair all weekend. I just wanted to come and meet you to say hi. Derek has told me so much about you."

"Hopefully good things," I joked.

"There's only good things to say," Derek commented, even though I knew it was a lie.

We headed to his apartment, which showcased once again that money wasn't a problem for him. It was a huge place with three

bedrooms on the eightieth floor in downtown Chicago. Sometimes, I wondered where I would've been if I'd taken him up on his offer to come work at his company. Then again, I knew deep down in my soul I was a southern boy through and through. Big city lights didn't call me home. I felt more at peace deep in the woods.

Stacey didn't stick around for long. Even though I said she was more than welcome to crash our dinner, she disagreed, saying we needed time to catch up.

Derek picked out the best steak house in the whole city, and I was more than willing to let him pay for it. Plumbers didn't make the kind of money that Derek did, and most of my paychecks went toward Dad's medical bills.

"It's really damn good to see you, Jax. We should start making visits more often. Once a year doesn't feel like enough anymore. Especially with Stacey being such a family girl. She was horrified when I told her we only saw each other once a year," Derek said, cutting into his ribeye.

"You're more than welcome to come down to Havenbarrow," I replied, to which he scrunched up his nose. His reaction was no surprise to me. I knew that Derek hadn't any plans of returning to his hometown. Not even to visit me. Too many of his demons lived there. Truthfully, I didn't blame him for not wanting to revisit them.

"You know that's too hard for me, Jax." His voice dropped a little. "But you're always welcome here."

"I know. I'll make more of an effort to get out this way, too."

Maybe I'd bring Kennedy to meet him and Stacey. The fact that bringing Kennedy up to visit was even a thought shocked me. The fact that it made me so happy shocked me even more.

"Or, you can just take a position at my business firm. You know I'll always make room for you, and it wouldn't be some bottom barrel position. You can work beside me, be a partner."

I laughed. "I don't have a business bone in my damn body, Derek. The idea of making me your partner is insane. I'd ruin your business in a heartbeat."

"I could train you. Seriously, Jax. We could make a great team."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Why do we have this conversation every year I come up here?"

He sighed and put his silverware down. "I want more for you than your life back in Kentucky."

“My life is fine down there. I have my business.”

“That was Cole’s plumbing business—not yours,” he argued. “You only took it over after he had his first stroke, because for some reason you feel as if you owe that bastard something.”

I always felt like I did owe my father something because I killed his wife. Seemed reason enough to keep his business going. “I’m good at it.” I shrugged. I knew Derek would never understand it, but I actually did enjoy my job. I was good at it and didn’t see me quitting any time soon. “Why are you always pushing me to leave Havenbarrow?”

“Because it’s a shit town. You don’t need that place in your life.”

I didn’t feel like arguing with him. We only had so much time to hang out. The last thing I wanted to do was fight.

“Subject change,” I said, shifting around in my seat. “How about a little more about this Stacey woman.”

Derek grinned like a schoolboy with his first crush. The conversation grew lighter, and after he finished telling me all about Stacey, I informed him all about Kennedy.

“No shit,” he breathed out, stunned. “That same girl you were crazy about as a kid?”

“That’s the one.”

“That’s right out of a Nicholas Sparks movie or something,” he joked. “So, she’s your girlfriend?”

The question lingered a bit in my mind. We didn’t really talk about labels, but it was no secret that Kennedy was mine, and I was hers. At least in my mind she was mine, and I didn’t see that changing any time soon. “You could say that.”

He kept smiling like a dork. “This is good stuff, Jax. Look at both of us. In relationships with good women. Mom would be proud.”

The mention of Mom tightened my chest a little as guilt hit me. “She should’ve been about to attend your wedding, Derek…” I swallowed hard and looked down. “I’m sorry I took that from you.” I took a lot of memories from him, and I hated myself for it. Mom was never going to meet her grandchildren. She was never going to take part in the mother-son dance at our weddings. She was never going to know how much success Derek had found.

“Stop it, Jax,” Derek scolded. “Don’t do that shit, okay? Don’t carry that on your shoulders.”

“It’s hard not to when I’m the reason—”

"*You're not*!" he hollered, making other people turned to look at us both. His voice was loud and powerful as his face turned red from his annoyance. Then, his voice cracked as he lowered his volume. "You're not responsible for that shit, Jax. It was a long time ago, and you can't hold that on your shoulders forever. It wasn't your fault. Someday you have to let that go."

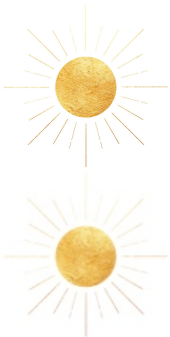
"I don't see that ever happening. I'm the reason she's gone, Derek, and I love you for acting like I'm not, but I know better. Anyway, sorry for bringing it up. Let's change the subject."

The easiest way to upset my brother was by saying I was responsible for Mom's death, but he was there. He was out there in the woods with me when I pulled the trigger. He knew what went down. There was no denying what I'd done.

Still, it tore him up inside to know that I blamed myself. Therefore, I'd do my best to not talk about it, especially when my time to visit with him was so short. The rest of the night was spent, trading stories of our past and talking about the future. Before dinner was over, Derek asked me a very important question that I was more than honored to answer.

"Jax, will you be my best man?"

29



Kennedy

I missed Jax. I felt like a broken record with the amount of times I told myself I missed him, too. It blew my mind how much I could miss someone that hadn't even been in my life that long. I did my best keeping busy, though, and thankfully, the words were still flowing.

Most of my weekend was spent in the library, with breaks to go get lunch at Gary's Café. Marty was more than willing to chat with me some about my writing. It turned out he wrote for fun, too, and mentioned we should have writing nights if I were up for it.

I liked that idea of having someone to talk to if I was stuck on my plot line. Then, during any down time, I'd think about Jax—write, eat, Jax. Wash, rinse, repeat.

On Saturday afternoon as I ate my second slice of red velvet cake at the café, I smiled brightly when I noticed Connor outside passing out flyers to passersby. I didn't know what he was up to, but I knew he was hustling. I'd never met a kid with such a strong work ethic. When he came barging into the café, everyone greeted him with bright smiles, because Connor was loved by everyone he knew.

"Hey, Kennedy!" he said, smiling ear to ear. "How are you

doing?"

"Great, Connor. How are you? How's your mom?" I asked. A few days ago, Connor told me that his mother was fighting cancer and doing a great job at the battle. When he talked about his mother, he spoke as if she was the greatest woman alive. I loved that about him. There was always something special about a boy loving his mother.

"She's doing really good actually! I have no doubt things are on the up-and-up." He held out a flyer and business card toward me. "Speaking about being on the up-and-up, I was wondering if you'd leave a Yelp review for JAC Landscaping."

I raised an eyebrow at the business card and couldn't help but laugh. "Does Jax know that you started a business while he was gone?"

He smirked. "I thought it would be better to surprise him with the news when he got back to town. Keep it on the down low, will you? I already have a few new clients reaching out to us after they saw your work in progress."

"He's going to kill you, Connor," I snickered, shaking my head.

"Yeah, well, what else is new?" He glanced at his cell phone. "Sorry to cut this short, but I have to get down to the church to pass out these flyers. They are just getting out of choir rehearsal, and I'm sure Jesus would love some of them to have blessed lawns. Bye, Kennedy!" He disappeared as quickly as he arrived, passing out flyers to anyone who walked pass him.

Jax was going to be thrilled by his new business.

After finishing my cake, I left the café, I noticed a woman struggling with a stroller as she dropped her diaper bag and all the goods went flying across the sidewalk. Without thought, I hurried over to help her.

"Here you go," I said, gathering up her things as she thanked me.

"Oh gosh, thank you so much. Sorry, I've been pretty scattered lately and didn't realize I didn't zip up the bag," she commented. "And with another on the way, I'm sure it's just going to get worse. Mom brain and all."

I looked down to her stroller where not one, but two babies were sitting. One was in a deep, peaceful rest while the other howled. My mind grew blurry and I took a step backward as I shook my head.

She tilted her head as she stared my way. “Are you okay?”

My lips parted, but I couldn’t say anything. Words weren’t coming to me as the panic attack began to climb in my chest. It wasn’t fair. She had two babies—and another one the way—and I didn’t have my Daisy.

Daisy.

She was gone because of me.

It was my fault.

A tear slipped down my cheek and the woman’s eyes widened in panic. “Oh my gosh, are you okay? I, did I say something? Are you…”?

“So-sorry,” I muttered, still staring at her scroller. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe, and this time Jax wasn’t there to walk me home.

The woman followed my stare, and her nerves only rose as she witnessed my eyes glued to her children. She quickly gathered the rest of her things and hurried away.

Move, Kennedy. Go. Stop it, I told myself. But nothing was happening. The panic was too big for me to run from. When a hand landed on my shoulder, I jumped to turn and see Amanda standing behind me.

“Are you okay?” she asked, confused by my sudden odd behaviors.

“I—I…” I swallowed hard. All I could do was shake my head. I felt so stupid. So weak. So lost. Amanda linked her arm with mine and led me to a bench across the street. We sat, and she waited out the panic that overtook me.

“Put your head between your legs and breathe,” she ordered. I did as she said, giving her no words, because it all felt like too much for me. She stayed beside me until my breaths returned to normal, and embarrassment replaced my fears.

“Thank you,” I muttered, sitting back up as my heartbeats continued to race.

“What’s the matter with you?” she snapped, looking at me as if I’d grown two heads. She was looking at me the same way Penn stared at me. As if I were a freak of nature.

“Sorry. I sometimes have panic attacks.”

“Why?” she questioned dryly. I was sure she was wondering why Jax would pick someone like me. Someone so damaged when she seemed so…whole.

“I…I went through a trauma last year. I’m still trying to work through it.”

She frowned. For a split second, I thought she felt bad for me, but then she spoke her truths. “Jax needs better than you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean it. He’s dealt with enough shit in his life, and now dealing with his asshole father dying, he doesn’t need someone with baggage. He’s already dealt with enough. Why would you even put your issues on his doorstep?”

My chest tightened as I sat back, stunned by her words. “No, I… I’m working through my issues. I’m not putting anything on Jax’s shoulders.”

“You are, though, and it’s completely selfish of you. And based on your current panic attack in public, it’s clear you’re not working hard enough on your damn issues. If you cared anything about him, you’d give him space and let him deal with the fact that his father is dying. The last thing he needs is some random girl’s drama.”

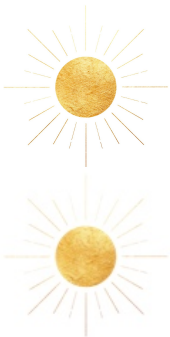
She didn’t say another word. She simply stood and walked away, leaving me sitting there stunned by her words.

I hated that they affected me. I hated that I started doubting myself and my relationship with Jax because of Amanda’s comments. What if she was right, though? What if I was making things harder for Jax? He’d been through so much. Why should he deal with my emotional breakdowns, too? What if Yoana was wrong with her concern about Jax making my situation worse? What if I was the problem?

What if I was a problem that could never be fixed?

I went home that night and overthought everything. Sleep never found me that night, and the next morning when Jax came back to town, I made sure I was too busy to see him. I needed to figure out my issues before I showed up to his doorstep. He was already going through so much on his own. It wasn’t fair if I allowed my issues to weigh his world down.

30



Kennedy

I stayed in the library for the next few days, telling Jax that I was too busy working on my novel to meet up with him. Every time he asked me if I were okay, I lied and said everything was fine. I still didn't know how to face him after my interaction with Amanda, even though all I wanted was to be in his arms to receive his comfort again.

That Tuesday, I stayed in the library for so long that I hadn't even noticed it'd started to rain while I was working. When Hunter came to kick me out of the library for the day, I was overwhelmed by the amount of rain that was falling around me.

My first thought was to call Jax, but I knew I couldn't do that. Instead, I pulled out my cell phone and used the Cuber app Connor had told me to download weeks ago. I entered 'diamond' for the promo code, and I couldn't help but smile when it worked.

Connor was young, but he was beyond intelligent. His app was brilliant.

I tried my best to not let the noise of the rain bother me as I waited for Connor's car to pull up in front of the library. When it did, I hurried down the steps and hopped into the passenger seat. My heart was already beating quickly in my chest, but I tried to

control the panic.

"Hi there, Kennedy! Welcome to Cuber, the next big thing in transportation. Can I offer you a water? Maybe some mints? I have some magazines if you'd like—"

"I'm good, Connor. I'd just like to get home as soon as possible."

"You got it. We at Cuber love to give the passengers exactly what they want, so I will have you home in no time. Sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride."

Not very likely.

The rain hammered overhead as Connor drove us down the road. I hated the rain, hated how its cries beat down on the car with aggression.

My hands were clasped tightly as I closed my eyes and took in deep breaths. We'd be home soon, and I'd be back inside, and everything would be okay. I would be okay.

I'm okay.

Every time the thunder roared, my heartrate skyrocketed. I could hear the song blasting on the speakers from all those years ago. I could hear Mama singing in the seat beside me. I could've sworn Daisy and Dad were singing along with Mama in the back seat.

Connor's phone dinged, and my eyes shot open.

"What was that?" I asked, panicking as my heart lodged firmly in my throat.

Connor smiled toward me and shrugged as he looked down to his console. "Just my phone. I bet my mom is wondering where I am." He reached for his phone as the rain hammered the car.

"No! Stop!" I shouted. I put my hand over his cell phone, and he paused, looking at me with a raised eyebrow. "Look at the road. It's raining too hard, and you shouldn't check your phone."

"Don't worry, Kennedy—I'm a professional at this," he said, yanking his phone up as he began flipping through it.

My heart pounded aggressively against my rib cage, trying to claw its way out of my chest, and I shook my head. "Pull over," I ordered.

He raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Pull over! Pull over! Pull over!" I shouted, pounding the dashboard with the heels of my hands. I couldn't breathe. My mouth sat agape as a rush of panic swallowed me whole. "Please, Connor! Please pull over, pull over."

“Okay, okay!” he said, pulling the car over to the side of the road. He put it into park, and I hopped out of the vehicle as fast as I could.

I headed toward the trees on the side of the road as the rain poured down, and I bent down, wrapped my arms around my legs, and rocked back and forth, paralyzed by fear. It was happening again. It was happening again. I was losing them. I was losing them all over again.

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* * *

“She started freaking out, man, and I can’t get her back into the car,” Connor said to someone after another car pulled up. I shivered in the chilly rain as thunder roared overhead. I couldn’t move. I’d been trying to move for the past fifteen minutes, but I couldn’t. My body was frozen in place as the rain pummeled my skin. Each droplet ignited a flashback, and each flashback heightened the panic shredding my soul.

It had been so long since I’d experienced a panic attack to this degree. I was supposed to be getting better. I was supposed to be finding my way to a new beginning. I was writing again. I was happy. At least, I thought I was happy.

Yet, there I was, curled in a ball under an oak tree, unable to move due to the flashbacks of my horrors.

“Okay, I got her,” a deep voice said, calm as day. He walked over toward me and bent down in front of me. “Hey, Sun,” Jax said, giving me his half-grin. “What’s going on?”

“I-I-I…I ca—can’t bre-brea…” I took a deep breath in as I wrapped my arms around my body and rocked back and forth.

“Breathe,” he said, nodding in understanding. “You can breathe. You are breathing. It’s just a bit erratic. We should get you out of the rain.”

“I can’t…the car…I c-can’t get in a car right now.”

He didn’t arch an eyebrow or show any signs of judgment as he watched me in the midst of my panic attack. He didn’t ask questions or tell me I could climb into the car and be just fine. He didn’t undermine my feelings or fears, and he didn’t tell me to just push through it the same way my ex used to do. He was the calmness in the middle of my hurricane.

“Then we won’t put you in a car, but you can’t stay out here in the rain, so come on.” He held his arms out toward me.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to carry you.”

My broken heart started beating again as I stared into the peace filling his gaze. As I was panicked, he stayed still. He was the calm of the sea as my mind swam through its own brutal waves of despair.

I shook my head. “No, Jax. We’re t-too far from my place. You can’t do it. Plus, I’m too heavy, and, and, and—”

“Kennedy,” he cut in, still holding his hands out toward me. “I’m going to carry you now.”

I didn’t say another word, just nodded as he wrapped his arms around me and lifted me from beneath the tree. He began walking in the direction of our houses, which were blocks away.

“What are you doing?” Connor asked.

“I’m taking her home.”

“That’s over a mile, Jax.”

“It’s not a problem,” he said matter-of-factly even though I knew it was an insane task.

Connor combed his hands through his hair and sighed. “I’ll follow behind you, in case you decide you need a ride.”

He climbed into his car and drove slowly behind Jax. Connor was to Jax what Jax was to me—a true friend. Anyone who would carry you in the rain was someone worth having in your life, and anyone who would trail you to make sure you didn’t need a ride was also worthy of awards.

Havenbarrow had men who were made for romance novels.

I buried my head into Jax’s chest as he carried me, never seeming tired from the heaviness of my body in his arms. Each step he took felt controlled and deliberate. As my head lay against his chest and as I listened to his heart beating, my own heartbeats seemed to calm.

“Thank you, Moon,” I whispered, holding onto his soaked shirt tightly.

“Any time, Sun,” he replied.

As we arrived home, he went ahead and carried me up the steps of my front porch. Connor rushed to me with my purse and keys. He held them out to me, and I thanked him.

Before I knew it, Connor wrapped his arms around me and held

on tight. “I’m so sorry, Kennedy. For anything I did, I’m sorry.”

I told him he hadn’t done anything wrong, but when he let me go, I saw the tears in his eyes as guilt swam in his stare. “I swear, Connor. I’m okay.”

He nodded once and straightened his baseball cap. “Get some rest, lady. Jax, keep an eye on her, will you?”

Jax brushed his hand across the back of his neck. “Will do.”

Connor headed back to his car and drove off, leaving a dripping-wet Jax standing on my porch. I felt a little silly now that I’d calmed down from my panic.

My hands brushed my cheeks as I gave him a pathetic smile. “You shouldn’t be standing in those wet clothes. I’m okay now, I swear. I’m going to change and head to bed and—”

“You can talk about it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“You can talk about what you’re feeling with me.”

I shook my head. My lips parted to speak, but I choked on my words, unable to express the emotions weighing heavily on my heart. “I don’t know how to talk about it. I thought I was better. I thought I was getting better.”

“You are getting better.”

“No, I’m not. I have panic attacks when I see kids. I have panic attacks when it rains. I can hardly get into a car without being overwhelmed. I can’t drive. Don’t you see? I’m not normal. Penn always said I was too much, and I am. Amanda was right.”

“Amanda?” he asked, arching an eyebrow. “What the hell does Amanda have to do with anything? What did she say to you?”

“It doesn’t matter. All that matters is she was right. You deserve someone who isn’t as broken as me.”

“You’re talking crazy,” he said, shaking his head. “You just had a panic attack—it’s not the end of the world.”

“Yes, it is. Don’t you see, Jax? I’m broken. I’m damaged goods, and you’ve already fixed yourself. You don’t deserve to have to deal with my broken pieces after you’ve been through so much on your own.”

“Tell me your truths, and I’ll stay,” he swore. “Whatever they are, Kennedy, I’m not afraid. I’m here.”

I lowered my head and wiped the tears that stubbornly kept falling. “Some days, I can hardly look at myself in the mirror without feeling the heaviness of my past mistakes.”

He stuffed his hands deep into his pockets and narrowed his eyes as he studied every inch of me. “I know how that feels.”

“But you’re better off in your healing. You did the work to get better. I feel like I take one step forward and five backward.”

“There’s no straight path, Kennedy. Healing isn’t linear. Healing comes with curves, bumps in the road, and potholes. I still have days when I think about my mother and want to stay in bed forever. I still have weeks when my body aches from the memories of the past, but I know those days are part of healing. Eddie once told me that we can’t heal if we are too afraid to honor our shadows, too. Even the sun gets covered by clouds some days. That doesn’t take away from the light it gives off.”

My lips parted, and I didn’t know what to say. My chest was still so tight, and my hands were shaky.

“Let me hold you,” he said, nodding my way. “Please?”

I nodded.

We headed into the house, and I changed out of my wet clothes. I gave Jax a pair of my oversized sweatpants, and he slipped into them, remaining shirtless.

We crawled into bed, and he wrapped his arms tightly around me as I allowed myself to break. He didn’t tell me to hurry. He didn’t say there was a time limit on suffering. He just allowed me to feel everything, all at once, and I realized how necessary that was for me. I needed to fall apart, and he was there to catch my broken pieces.

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* * *

“I have this fear,” I confessed, staring up at the ceiling of my bedroom. I’d spent a good amount of time crying against Jax’s chest and was finally coming back down to Earth with my emotions. “That I’m too hard for anyone to love. That my brokenness is a turn-off to the world. That my trauma broke me into too many unlovable pieces.”

Jax was quiet for a moment. It was as if he was trying to form the words in the perfect way to make me understand his thoughts. When he spoke, I was listening with every ounce of my being.

“I’ve never been in love,” he said. “I’ve never been in love, have never known how it works, but I’m trying to understand it more.

I'm trying to learn all I can about it. What I've learned so far is when I think about love, I think about you."

My lips parted as chills raced over my body. "Jax…"

"I love your broken pieces, because it shows that you've lived. It shows that you are brave enough to give yourself to the world, no matter how hard it can be at times." He looked into my eyes. "I love you, Kennedy. I love you in a way that's bigger than love. I love your sun rays and your moon shadows, and I am going to keep loving you and your broken pieces until you feel my love so strongly you forget your heart has any damaged cracks. Then, I'm going to love you more."

His words healed parts of me I hadn't even known were broken. My lips danced across his, and I kissed him ever so lightly. "I love you, too."

"One day, you're going to get past this, Kennedy. One day, you're going to be able to walk outside and dance in the rain like you did when you were younger, and I'll be dancing right there with you. But you don't have to rush it, okay? You are allowed to go slow. There's no timeline to healing. You walk at the pace that works for you, and I'll carry you when your legs get tired. You don't have to walk this path alone."

That night, the storm outside raged on, but for the first time in a long time, because I was in Jax's arms, I was able to fall asleep.

* * *

When I woke up the next day, the sun was streaming through the windows. I rolled over in bed to see that Jax was gone. Sitting up quickly, I reached for my phone, and it was already past eleven in the morning. I had crashed a lot harder than I had thought.

I slipped on my robe and went searching the house for Jax. Had he left without saying anything? Before I could wonder any more, I heard a loud buzzing sound coming from outside. When I reached my front door, my heart almost leaped out of my chest as I saw thousands of bubbles being blown in my direction. Dozens of bubble machines were sitting in my front yard, and right in the midst of it all, Jax stood with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his sweatpants, wearing a big smile on his face.

"What is this?" I laughed, shaking my head back and forth.

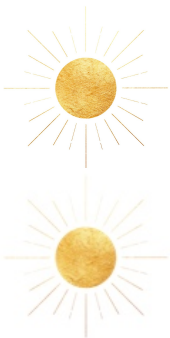
“You can’t be sad when blowing bubbles,” he told me, walking my way. He took my hands into his and squeezed them. “And I wanted you to feel a kiss from your daughter this morning. I wanted you to remember that, no matter what, she’s still here.”

Tears formed in my eyes. “You’re everything I wanted and everything I never knew I could have.”

“I’m yours,” he promised. “I think I always have been.” He took a step back, held his hand out toward me, and bowed slightly. “Now, will you do me the honor of dancing with me in the bubbles?” he asked.

I laughed, took his hand, and we danced.

31



Kennedy

“What are you doing here?” I gasped as Yoana came walking up toward my front porch. Jax and Connor were working on the landscaping and I was knee-deep in writing a scene in my novel when I noticed my sister skipping my way.

I shot to my feet and hurried over to her, pulling her into a tight hug.

“You guys weren’t supposed to be home until next month,” I said, confused as ever.

“Yes, well, I had a little birdy in town tell me you might be in need of some family. Nathan is back at home, resting, so I figured I’d stop by to see you so we can talk,” Yoana said as she glanced over at Jax, who was trying his best to act as if he was hard at work. “And you must be Jax.” She smiled as she walked over to him. “It’s nice to see you again after all these years, and thank you for that call.” She pulled him into a hug, and I was still confused as ever.

“You called her? How?” I asked, baffled.

He shrugged. “I grabbed your phone the other night while you were sleeping and reached out to her. I figured you could use some familiar faces around.”

My heart was his.

"Thank you, Jax," I said, and he gave me his half-grin, which warmed me up inside. I went on to hug Yoana again.

She wrapped an arm around my shoulder and nudged me in the side with her hip. "Now, how about a cup of Mama's favorite coffee so we can catch up a little?"

"Aren't you jetlagged? You don't have to hang out with me if you're exhausted."

"I'd rather be exhausted with you than sleeping. Now, come on. I need you to catch me up on everything, especially the hottie that little Jax turned out to be."

I shook my head. "I thought you were concerned about me dating him."

"After that phone call? No way. I was wrong. I was very, very wrong. So, come on—caffeinate me."

We headed inside, and my chest felt as if it were going to explode with excitement from having my sister back with me. I needed her more than I even knew. We sat down in the dining room, talking about everything under the sun. She told me all about her travels, and I could see that whenever she mentioned Nathan, she had even more love for him than when they'd left. It amazed me how love could keep growing after so many years.

"And this Jax guy, Kennedy," she said, shaking her head as she held her cup of coffee. "He's the real deal, isn't he?"

"I think so. He just makes me feel better. He makes me feel happy on days that would normally be sad."

"Good," she said, nodding her head. "That's what you deserve. I'm not going to lie; I was really nervous when you told me about his past. I didn't want you to get hurt, but the way he showed up for you when you were at your lowest, the way he championed you…that's what I always wanted for you. I wanted you to have a real love, the kind that holds you up instead of letting you fall. Penn wasn't that man for you, but Jax…the way he looks at you…" She pretended to swoon, making me laugh.

"You saw him stare at me for all of two seconds, and that was all it took?"

"Yes," she said somberly. "You know why?"

"Why is that?"

"Because he stared at you the way Daddy looked at Mama—like you were the world and he was lucky to even be near your orbit."

Butterflies kicked around in my stomach. “That’s how he makes me feel: important, like I’m enough.”

“Because you are enough, Kenny. You always have been. I know you’ve been through some hard times, but in the end, I know they are going to make you stronger. I’m already so proud of the progress you’ve made.”

I looked down at the coffee swirling in my mug. “Sometimes, I think I was so foolish for staying away for so long. I could’ve been here with you and Nathan and healed much faster.”

“Nobody can make a person heal faster, but we sure as hell would’ve sat with you during the rain.”

Maybe that’s what it’s all about. Maybe it isn’t about getting to the sunlight, but being able to weather the storm with those you love most.

“I think I’m going to start seeing someone,” I said. “Jax mentioned how therapy helped him, and I think it might help unclog some of the mess built up inside my head.”

“I think that’s a brilliant idea. It takes a brave person to reach out for help. Just never forget that you aren’t alone in this world, Kennedy. I’ve got your back through thick and thin, and you know the most beautiful thing about it all?”

“What’s that?”

“We now have a team of angels watching over us each day. If that isn’t a blessing, I don’t know what is.”

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* * *

That night, I thanked Jax with both my words and my body. I loved on him as if it was the only thing I was ever meant to do. Our bodies fit together so well, as if we were each other’s missing puzzle piece. I loved the way he loved me, both with his body and his words.

As we lay in bed, his phone dinged, and he sat up to see it. I saw the grave look on his face as he read the words before him.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s from Amanda about my father,” he said somberly. “He’s on life support, and it’s not looking good. They transported him to a hospital.”

“Oh my gosh, Jax. I’m so sorry.”

He began scrambling. “I have to get down there. I have to go see, I have to…” He began putting his clothes on, and his words were jumbled. “I need to—”

“Hey,” I said, stilling him by placing my hands on his shoulders. “It’s okay. I got you. I’ll drive you there.”

“No, I can’t ask you to do that. I know how driving is for you. I’m okay, I’m…”

“Jax, you’re not okay. You can’t drive right now. I got you. Give me your keys.”

He reluctantly handed them over, and we gathered our things before leaving. As I slipped into the driver’s seat, I took the deepest breath of my life. I’d have been lying if I said my nerves weren’t shot, but I had to get past that quickly, because in the passenger seat was a man who’d stood beside me during my storms, and now it was my turn to do the same for him. I turned the key in the ignition, put my foot on the gas, and away we went.

When we arrived, the outlook wasn’t good. Jax brought a book inside with him, and the doctors informed him that there wasn’t much time left for Cole, said Jax should prepare to say his goodbyes.

He didn’t say a word to his father about his feelings. He didn’t express his love or gratitude. He didn’t share stories about how his father had changed his life. Instead, he sat and read *War and Peace*. He read chapter after chapter until his emotions began to get the best of him. When it became too much, when the words wouldn’t fall from between his lips and the heartache began to drown him, I took the book from his grip, and I began to read the words for him.

32

Kennedy

Cole took his last breath on August 5th. I was there with Jax when it happened. We sat inside the hospital room, the nurses giving us space as Jax witnessed his father's lungs inhale and exhale for the last time.

After it happened, Jax turned to me and lowered his voice. "Is it wrong that I'm somewhat relieved he's gone? Is it selfish to think that he can no longer hurt me? Does that make me a monster?"

"No," I said, taking his hand into mine. "It makes you human."

The day of the funeral, the sun was out, but the world felt gloomy. It was a small gathering of people that met at the graveyard; Cole hadn't wanted a ceremony. Jax's brother, Derek showed up with his fiancée, Stacey. Eddie and Marie came, along with Connor, Yoana, and Nathan. Everyone who cared about Jax was there to surround him.

My heart began to skip a beat when I turned to see another figure walking toward us. Joy was approaching the cemetery, and when she reached us, she took a place right beside Jax.

He turned toward her, shocked that she had finally left her house after so many years. "What are you doing here?" he asked her, confusion filling his stare.

Joy gave him the kind of smile that makes all broken hearts heal. She took his hand into hers and held it tight. “I go where the love is,” she calmly replied. “Which means I go where you are.”

My heart almost exploded as I witnessed them sharing this moment.

“Thank you, Joy,” Jax whispered.

“Always,” she replied.

When it came time for Jax to say a few words, he wasn’t certain what should be said. “Most of you never knew my father, and those of you who did, you didn’t know him to be the greatest man. It’s ridiculous for me to pretend he was a good father to me, because he wasn’t. He was cruel, and hard, and most of the days, I hated him, and still…” He took in a breath. “You ever hate someone so much and still miss them at the same time? That’s how jaded my love for my father is. All I ever wanted to do was make him proud, even down to his final days.”

Jax reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the novel he’d been reading to his father. “This was the book my father saw my mother reading the first day they met. He said he read it because he wanted something they could connect on. I’m not going to lie and pretend my parents had a great relationship, because they didn’t. They had flaws, like us all, but this book connected them, and I wanted to finish reading it to him before his last days so I could find a connection with him, too. I fell a couple chapters short, which is how I felt about our relationship in general. We fell a couple chapters short.”

Sniffling, he brushed his hand beneath his nose and shrugged. “I hope he finds peace in the darkness, and I hope wherever he goes, morning will come, and he’ll be given another chance at finding his light.”

He lowered his head as his emotions overtook him. I hurried to his side to hold his hand. Eddie moved in too and took the book from his hand.

“What are you doing?” Jax asked.

“I’m going to read a few chapters,” Eddie said, flipping through the pages. “Because the book is not done until the last word is read.”

“There is still a way to go, Eddie,” Jax argued. “You can’t read all of it.”

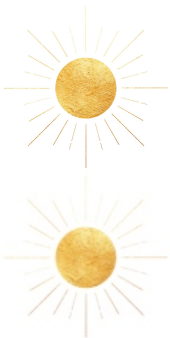
“I’ll read some, too,” Yoana cut in, and like a chain reaction,

everyone stepped up to read along as we stood around Cole's casket. It was the most beautiful moment I'd ever witnessed. We passed the book around, one by one, and when it came to the last page, Jax read the words out loud.

When he finished, he placed the novel on top of the casket and said his final goodbyes.

Then we all walked back to our cars holding each other's hands, because walking alone wasn't something we'd ever have to do again.

33



Kennedy

After the funeral, we headed over to Jax's house. It seemed he was handling things pretty well up until it came time for him and Derek to go through their father's belongings. They'd been in Cole's office for a while before I heard Jax shout, "This is bullshit!"

Alarmed, I checked in on the two of them to make sure they were okay, and the moment I saw Jax, my heart began to break.

His eyes looked heavy—tired—and his hands were wrapped around a glass of whiskey.

We hadn't had a chance to change out of our outfits from the funeral. We hadn't had a chance to even think, really. Jax's black suit was unbuttoned, his tie was undone, and his internal light had slowly burned out.

"We'll figure this out, Jax. Don't worry," Derek said, his voice somber. He turned to walk out of the office and gave me a halfway grin. "Take care of him?"

"I will." Derek closed the door behind him, leaving me alone with a very upset looking Jax. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"He was an asshole." Jax nodded, looking down at the glass, which was shaking. "And I don't mean that in a 'I'm a grown-ass man with daddy issues' way. No, I simply mean he was an asshole.

No one showed up to his funeral because he was an asshole. No one other than me visited him in the hospital because he was an asshole. To the very end, even after death, he was a fucking asshole." He chuckled, but we both knew there was nothing funny. Every laugh felt like a stab. Every smile felt like pain.

I leaned against the doorframe and stared at him. "Jax…"

"*Don't*," he hissed, lifting the glass from the desk. "Don't make me feel better. I don't want your light right now."

"What can I do? How can I help you?"

"You can't. You don't get it. You don't know what he did…" He took a deep breath and moved to the bookshelf, where he rested his hand, the liquor wavering back and forth in the glass. His back was turned to me, but I could hear it in his voice—the brokenness.

"Tell me," I urged.

"Derek left after my mom passed away, after he saw the man my father had truly always been. He was smart to get away, and I could've left with him, too. I could've left. Derek told me to come with him, but I stayed because I figured I owed my father something. He never told me anything that made me feel as if I was good enough. He never gave me a reason to stay. I remember every fucking time he laid his hands on me. I remember every repulsive comment he made to me, and I can't for the life of me remember the last time he told me he loved me. Ever. Then he dies. He *dies*, Kennedy. Dead. And he has the nerve to leave that behind for me." He gestured toward the desk.

My eyes traveled to that location before I walked over and lifted up the packet of paperwork. It was a copy of his father's will.

Jax snickered. "Flip to page three, paragraph four," he ordered. When I did as he said and read what was written there, my stomach dropped, and I felt a wave of sickness wash over me.

My gaze found Jax's, and he nodded. I reread the paragraph, hoping it was wrong, a typo, some kind of mistake. It wasn't.

"He left Derek the plumbing company, and the property. He left him this…" he said, nodding his head, chewing on the corner of his mouth. "This is all I've ever had. My father and this place were all I ever fucking had, and he gave it to my brother, who ran away."

I wasn't sure what to say. I wasn't sure how to process the information. All I knew was Jax had been dealt a shitty hand in life, and just when it'd looked like the possibility of it turning around was alive, life happened again, dealing him another round of

disappointments.

"He had to have left you something… He had to have…" My words stumbled and somersaulted off my tongue. "This doesn't make sense," I said, still in disbelief.

"Cole Kilter never made sense."

"He left you nothing?"

He shook his head and gestured toward the will again. "There's a shoe box on the floor. That's what he gave me."

I glanced down and picked up the box. Inside were letters—our letters, the ones I'd never received from Jax and the ones I'd sent his way that he never got. On top of them was a piece of paper that read, *You took my happiness, so I took yours.*

When I looked up, Jax was staring at me. I didn't have a clue what to say or what to feel, so I couldn't even imagine what thoughts were running through his mind.

"It's funny, isn't it?" He paced the office, his voice rising. "Even from his grave, he gets to hurt me."

"Jax…"

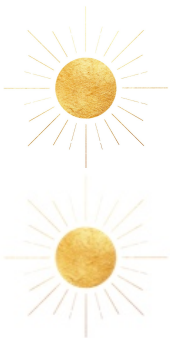
He shook his head back and forth. "All this time I thought there would be some point to all of this, some reason behind all the bullshit, but there wasn't."

How was I supposed to fix this? How could I make a man who'd spent his whole existence fighting for others see that he, too, was worth fighting for when so many things in his life had told a different story?

"It's all a joke," he muttered. Stepping back, he stared at the damage, and I saw the tiny tremble in his bottom lip. He dropped the glass to the ground, and as it shattered, so did he. He fell to his knees and his shoulders slumped forward. He didn't cry, but I knew it was his breaking point. My hand covered my mouth to hide my own cries for the broken soul before me. When he couldn't cry, I fell apart for him.

His hands landed on the broken glass, which sliced into his skin. I moved to him and didn't say a word. I didn't beg him to stand. I didn't tell him to try to be strong. I sat beside him during his storm, and I stayed when he begged me to leave him alone.

34



Kennedy

“How’s he holding up?” Derek asked after I forced Jax to lay down for some rest. Derek and Stacey were staying at the bed and breakfast in town. Stacey headed back to rest a bit, but he didn’t want to leave without knowing that his brother was okay.

I walked over to him and sat down on the couch with him. “He’s struggling, of course. I can’t blame him. What your father—”

“He wasn’t my father,” Derek hissed through gritted teeth. “He wasn’t Jax’s father, either. Not by a long shot. The way that monster treated Jax was disgusting. I couldn’t even imagine what he went through when I left. I shouldn’t have left him here.”

“You tried to get him to come with you,” I offered.

“Yeah, well, I should’ve tried harder.”

“At least you can leave him the property,” I said. “I’m sure you can sign it over to his name, or something. I’m sure there’s a way to make this work.”

Derek lowered his head. His fingers were laced together, and his knuckles were white as he stayed quiet.

“Derek,” I urged. “You can turn your father’s cruelty into something good.”

“I know,” he agreed. “Which is exactly why I’m going to sell this

hellhole to the highest bidder."

I felt the stab of his words. "You can't do this. This place means everything to Jax."

"Really? Is it because of the fist holes in the walls? Is that's what's keeping him here? Or the memories of when Cole threw the microwave across the kitchen? Or the memories of when he punched me so hard that I blacked out the night before I left? Is that what's keeping him here?" he snapped.

"No. Of course not."

"Then what in the hell could keep him staying in this place?"

"Your mother," I breathed out.

Derek began tapping his foot against the carpeted floor. His whole body was shaking. "That's another reason he should leave this place behind. It holds too much tragedy."

"He's trying to turn it into something beautiful. You have to believe that, Derek."

"You can't make beauty out of our past. Trust me, I've tried."

I grimaced watching Derek's anxiety build more and more as he sat there. I knew his mind was moving at the speed of light, and he truly believed he was doing the right thing by selling his family's land.

"Derek—"

"I'm going to get in contact with the right people to get this moving on sooner than later." He stood from the couch and brushed his thumb against his brows. "I have a flight back home early tomorrow, but I'll be in touch with Jax."

"Wait, no. Please, reconsider," I begged, shooting to stand up. "This will break him, Derek. If you take this house from him, he will break."

The corner of his mouth flinched as he refused to make eye contact with me. "He's been through worse things and made it out okay. I'm sure he'll get through this, too, and be better for it. He can finally start a life."

"He has a life here."

"No, he has a cage here. One he's been stuck in for too damn long. Listen, Kennedy, I get it. You care about him. I do, too. That's why I'm making this choice. He won't make it for himself. I've done a lot of messed up things in my life. I'd made the wrong choices time and time again, but I feel in my soul this is right."

"Where will he go?" I whispered, shaking my head. "Without his

home, where will he go?"

"That's the beauty of this all," he muttered as he smoothed out his designer suit. "He can go anywhere but here. Tell him I said goodbye, will you?"

"How about you tell him yourself? Be a man. Look your brother in the eye and tell him what you're playing to do."

"I've never been a brave person." His head lowered for a second and he took a deep inhalation before sighing. "Just tell him it's for the best and I'll be in touch."

"You're a coward," I barked, disgusted by the idea that Derek was going to walk away without telling Jax his plans. That he didn't even have the guts to look his brother in the face and tell him the truth. "He adores you, and you are going to crush him."

"He'll forgive me, because that's what Jax does. He forgives people."

"That doesn't give you the right to take advantage of him."

"You're right, and maybe I'll have to face a heavy load of karma for this choice, but at least I'll be able to sleep better knowing that my brother isn't staying in this prison. I get that you care about him, hell, I'm happy he has someone fighting for him, but I'm fighting for him, too. I'm sorry you can't see that right now, but over time maybe you will. Goodbye, Kennedy."

He left me there with the news that I knew was going to destroy the man I loved.

There I was, with the ticking bomb in my hands, which I knew was going to explode Jax's soul in the worst of ways.

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* * *

After I'd told Jax the news about Derek leaving, he didn't get upset. He didn't shout and he didn't breakdown. He seemed…deflated. Numb, almost. As if he rolled through every emotion and was left with complete emptiness.

"I think you to go," Jax said as we sat on the edge of his bed.

"No, Jax. I'm not going to leave you."

I kept reassuring him of that fact, but I wasn't certain he was even hearing me anymore.

He was unplugged from his surroundings, unplugged from his feelings, unplugged from me.

He shifted around as he sat down on his mattress before clearing his throat. “I have to use the bathroom.”

I stood to my feet as he stood. He gave me a weak smile. “You don’t have to follow me to the toilet, Sun. I think I can handle that.”

“Right. Of course. Okay. I’ll be right here waiting.” I sat back down as he walked out of the room. A few moments later, I heard the engine of his truck start up. I dashed to the front door in time to watch him drive away.

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* * *

“He hasn’t been answering his phone. I’ve been calling nonstop. It’s been over four hours,” I explained to Yoana the moment she arrived at my place. “I’m really worried.”

“I’m sure he’s okay. He probably needed to clear his mind. Everything that happened was a lot for him.”

“I don’t want him out there alone, though. I want to be there for him. I feel like he needs someone, but he’s pushing everyone away. I know what that hell is like. I pushed you away for a whole year because I knew you would give me comfort, and I didn’t think I deserved it.”

The sadness of that truth stung Yoana’s eyes. “You love him, don’t you?”

I nodded. “With everything I am.”

She gave me a broken smile and nudged me in the arm. “Do you know what you do when you love somebody?”

“What’s that?”

“Love them so much more on their worst days. Jax is hurting, and even though he might not think he does, he needs you. He needs you more than ever before. Do you know what I would do if it was Nathan?”

I waited for her answer.

She stood, walked to the front door, and began putting on her tennis shoes. “I’d search every corner of the world to bring him back home to me. So, let’s go searching.”

I grabbed my shoes, and we were on our way.

35

Jax

“Whiskey,” I muttered, sliding my empty glass toward the bartender. I didn’t know how long I’d been sitting inside that bar. I didn’t know how long I’d been there. I drove off from Kennedy and her comfort because my mind was too messed up. I needed to get away, and when I made it out of town, I realized I had nowhere else to go.

I didn’t know anything else but that damn town.

So, I ended up in Ray’s Bar and Grill, drunk off my ass on a Saturday night. I was officially to the point where the whiskey stopped burning and my thoughts went blank. *Good.* I didn’t want to feel anything. I didn’t want to deal with the fact that after years of trying to make up for my past mistakes, I’d still failed. I was homeless, with nothing to show for it.

I gave my father everything I had, and he screwed me over. Even though he told me that someday I’d get the land. Even though he swore it would be passed down to me. That was my mistake—believing in a liar. I might as well had believed in Santa Claus.

“You sure you haven’t had enough, Jax?” Ray asked, narrowing his eyes. What was the deal with people naming the restaurants after their first names in this town? Did they lack that much creativity?

Shit.

I was drunk.

"I buried an asshole today, Ray. I could handle more whiskey," I muttered.

Ray frowned. "Heard about that." He didn't offer me his condolences, because he was an honest man. He wasn't sad that my father had passed away. Didn't blame him. Yet, he did place my glass back in front of me and leave the whiskey bottle with me.

I raked my hands through my hair that was wild and untamed before pouring myself another glass. I shut off my phone, to avoid Kennedy's calls that kept coming through. I wasn't ready to feel good. I wasn't ready for her love that she was going to give to me.

All I wanted to do was drown in my pathetic truths.

All I wanted was to be left alone.

Unfortunately, I knew that wasn't going to happen the moment I heard a giggling voice come crashing into the bar. "Oh my gosh, Lars! Stop it," Amanda snorted.

I glanced over my shoulder to see two Amandas and three Lars' barging into the place. They were tipsy, obvious, and dancing to the country music that was blaring on the radio. Since when was music playing?

Maybe the whole time.

I blinked a few times and shook my head. Turned out there were only one Amanda and one Lars. Whatever. It didn't matter.

I went back to my whiskey and tried my best to shake off my annoyance when Lars hollered. "Well, if it isn't Jax Kilter out at the bar. What a treat for everyone in this place!" he shouted, clapping his hands together.

My chest tightened, but still, I ignored.

"Leave him alone, Lars," Amanda said. "He's been through enough today."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot that was okay. I bet that's why he's here, though. I'm sure he's having a celebration drink for his deadbeat father. Is that what you're doing, Jax?" Lars asked, marching toward me and placing his hands against my shoulders.

My hands gripped the glass and I stayed quiet.

"Lars, come on. Let's grab a table and eat," Amanda begged, as if she was surprised by the fact that Lars was being a dick. It was in his DNA. "Leave him alone."

Did she really believe that was something Lars was going to do?

He hadn't left me alone ever in our lives. Why would he take it easy on me that evening? Besides, Lars' favorite pastime was kicking people when they were already down.

Nothing like beating the fallen with a stick.

"How about you get a table, and I catch up with an old friend." He ordered.

"I'm not your friend," I muttered.

He tilted his head toward me and moved in closer. "What did you say?"

Amanda took a few steps toward us. "Lars—"

"Go," he said, giving her his cocky smile.

I looked over to Amanda. Her eyes were filled with concern. I wasn't sure if the concern was for me or herself.

"Don't let him talk to you like that," I softly spoke. "Don't let anyone talk to you like that."

"Jax," she started, and Lars once again cut her off.

"*I said get a table*," he snapped.

How did she end up next to him? She was better than that. She deserved better. Based on the way she dropped her head and went to find a table for the two of them, she didn't know that she was better off without him.

She knew I wasn't a fan of Lars. I couldn't help but wonder if she went for him to try to get my attention.

"Does it bother you?" Lars asked me, still not backing up. "Me fucking your ex-girl?"

"Dude. Are you serious right now? We're almost thirty. How about you get over this shit already?" I muttered. "It's a bit old."

"It must be killing you. Truthfully, I'm surprised Amanda stayed with you as long as she did. And you know what? After I'm done screwing her, I'm going to go ahead and screw your new chick, too."

That took it too far. "If you step anywhere near Kennedy," I hissed, turning his way.

"Ohh, there he is." He smirked. "The beast is waking up."

"What do you want from me, Lars?"

"I want you to leave this town. We're better off without your toxic ways. And you think you're slick? Starting up a landscaping business? Taking my client?"

"I'm not starting a landscaping business," I mumbled.

"Then what the hell is this?" he barked, tossing a business card

my way.

I picked it up and tried to focus my stare the best I could. Of course, Connor made business cards and was handing them out around town. I should've known he'd end up doing something stupid like that.

"It's not real," I told him.

"It's real to me when people talk about getting quotes from another business. I can't have you out here taking money out of my pocket."

"Nobody's taking your money," I groaned. I was too drunk for this. Why was Lars even talking to me? Didn't he have a date to get back to?

"Of course, you're not, because you're a deadbeat, just like your dead ass father. Nobody in this town wants to work with you, outside of having you fix their shitty toilets. A shit man handling shit, that's all you are. I wish you would've shot yourself when you killed your fucked-up mother," he whispered, his voice low and coated in venom.

And just like that, the numb parts of my soul lit up inside of me as he spoke about my mother. "What do you want, Lars?" I snapped, standing up from the stool. "You want me to flip out? You want me to lose it? You want me to fight you? You want to make me out to be an asshole? Fine. Here, I am, Jax-fucking-Kilter! The asshole who killed his mother. The asshole who got beat by his father. The asshole who has nothing. You want the monster in me to come out? Here you go! Have at it! Give me your best shot," I hissed, holding my arms out wide open. What did I have to lose?

"You really want to do this, Kilter?" Lars asked, seemingly surprised.

No. I didn't want to fight Lars. I didn't want to do anything. I was drunk, everything was spinning, and the numbness that I held was fading away.

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter," I mumbled.

"What's the matter with you, huh? Why are you such a weird fucking guy? Why are you always mumbling?" Lars barked. "I don't know how Amanda put up with that."

I didn't want to deal with him. I didn't want to deal with anyone. All I wanted was to be left alone.

As I turned to walk away, Lars gripped my shoulder and whipped me around to face him. "I'm not done talking to you,

asshole!" he shouted, and without thought I slammed my fist straight into his face.

I didn't mean to do that. I was walking away. All I wanted to go home.

I didn't have a home…

Shit, shit, shit.

Before I could focus, Lars tackled me and sent me to the ground. We began wrestling as everyone in the bar shouted. Amanda sounded like she was crying. Some people cheered us on, others tried to split us up.

"Get the fuck out!" Ray shouted, pulling us from one another.

"Ray, sorry." Lars stood to his feet. "He started it."

"Save it, Lars. You're a real dick for messing with Jax today of all days. Get the hell out," he ordered. Ray reached a hand out toward me. "You good, Jax?"

I nodded but didn't say anything else as I stood. My face hurt. My head hurt. My heart ached, too.

I reached into my pocket, pulled out cash, tossed it on the counter. "Sorry, Ray," I muttered before stumbling out of the bar.

I began patting my pockets, for my keys when a voice called out to me.

"Jax!"

I looked up to see four Kennedys coming my way.

Two Kennedys.

Nope, just one.

"What are you d-doing here?" I stuttered, stumbling. I could've laid right on the sidewalk and been okay.

"I'm here to take you home," she said, wrapping an arm around mine.

I yanked it away. "Home?" I laughed. "Good one, Kennedy."

I began walking the opposite direction of her, and she chased after me. "Wait, Jax. Come on. You can stay at my place. You don't have to do this alone."

"Why not? That's how I've been doing everything."

"You're drunk," she whispered, coming back to me, and holding my arm. That electric shock she sent through me was still there. I hated how she warmed me up. I hated how being near her made things feel a tad bit better.

"I'm fucked up." I sighed. "I should go. I need to get out of this town. I need to leave this place. I need to—"

“Come with me,” she cut in. Her honey-colored eyes piercing me.

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Everywhere. Wherever you go, take me with you.” She took my hands into hers and pulled me in closer to her body. I wanted to pull away, but I wanted to stay more. Her forehead rested against mine. “Stay, Jax.”

“Sun…”

“Stay, Moon,” she whispered, placing her hands against my chest.

My eyes closed as my mind began to spin.

“Stay with me,” she pleaded.

“I have nothing, Kennedy. I have nothing to give you.”

“Give me your heart, and that’s all I need. Please, Jax. Please,” she begged, running her lips gently across mine. “If you stay, I’ll love you forever.”

I opened my eyes, and there she was, my lover. My friend. My sunlight.

“What am I going to do?” I asked, my voice cracking.

“Let’s go home tonight, and we’re going figure it out in the morning. Okay?”

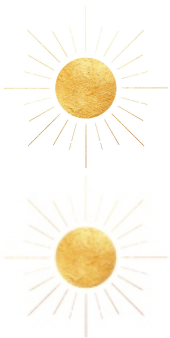
We’re going to figure it out.

We.

It wasn’t just me, myself, and I anymore. I wasn’t walking alone, because Kennedy was brave enough to walk beside me.

I nodded slowly and took her hand into mine. “Okay.”

36



Kennedy

“What are you doing here? How did you know where I was staying?” Derek asked the next morning.

“There’s only one bed and breakfast in town. It’s not that hard to figure out.” I didn’t sleep a wink the previous night, because Jax couldn’t sleep, so I stayed up with him until the sun came peeking through the windows.

“Can I show you something?” I asked.

Derek scratched at his beard and cleared his throat. “Stacey and I have to get to the airport soon. I don’t really have time.”

“It won’t take long. I just want to show you.”

“Show me what?”

“What Jax has created. Just come look, please. I promise you’ll see that your family property needs to stay with Jax.”

He glanced to his wrist watch then crossed his arms. “I only have about twenty minutes to spare.”

“Trust me, it won’t take that long.”

He didn’t say anything else, just nodded in agreement.

I led Derek to the woods on Jax’s land. We didn’t say a word the whole way there. Once we arrived at the field of daisies, Derek’s eyes watered over seeing all of the flowers.

“Daisies,” he muttered, sounding like his brother.

“Yes.”

“They were her favorite flowers.” He cleared his throat. “Jax made this spot for her?”

“Yes. He has a lot more plans, too. He kept all of her old landscaping blueprints and—”

“Shit,” Derek whispered before a shout fell through his lips. “Fuck!”

His outburst threw me for a loop, and I wasn’t sure what to say. “I’m sorry if I upset you bringing you out here,” I said, feeling guilty for my idea. I thought it would help him.

“No, you don’t get it,” he said as tears began falling down his cheeks. He placed his hands on top of his head as the emotions poured out. “You don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“Any of this.” He swallowed hard and placed his hands behind his head. “Everything my brother went through is my fucking fault.”

I narrowed my eyes, baffled. “What are you talking about?”

“All his struggles, all his pain. Him being stuck with Cole, it’s all on me. And here he is planting Mom’s favorite flowers out of guilt for something that wasn’t even his fault.”

“Derek. What’s going on?”

“The accident. It wasn’t him.” His head dropped and tears fell quickly down his cheeks. His whole body shook as he spoke words that turned the whole world upside down. “It was me, Kennedy. It was me. I shot her. I killed our mother, not Jax.”

The words rocked me, and the silence that filled the woods was terrifying.

I took a few steps back. “What? No. Jax did it. I know you probably blame yourself because you took him out there, but—”

“No,” Derek disagreed. “I did it. I pulled the trigger, Kennedy. The safety was on his gun. He didn’t turn off the safety. I did it. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I shot her. I killed my mother.”

He began sobbing uncontrollably as he unfolded his truths. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to move forward with everything that was coming out of Derek’s mouth. He shot his mother? He killed Elizabeth and allowed Jax to live with the idea that he was the one who pulled the trigger?

What the hell was going on?

37

Derek
Seventeen years old

Cole called off Jax's summer camp trip. He wouldn't let him go, because Jax didn't kill the deer. Mom fought Cole to let Jax go, but he said it was his money and he wasn't sending his weak son to camp.

Mom and Cole fought all the time lately, and I couldn't stand it. It was just like before, when Mom fought with my Dad. I hated the yelling, but I hated the thought of us leaving Cole more. I knew Mom would leave him, though, if Jax didn't get his shit together. I already lost one dad, and I didn't want to lose another.

For the most part, Cole was everything I wanted in a father. He came to all my football games. We fished together. We went hunting. He was fucking amazing. Sure, he didn't give Jax the easiest time, but that was Jax's fault. He acted like a baby all the time. If he would act like a boy and not a little girl, Cole would treat him like he treated me. Then, Mom and Cole would be happy, and everything would be okay. I was going to make sure of it.

"Get out of bed," I barked, walking into Jax's bedroom and shoving him in the shoulder late one afternoon after another day of Mom and Cole fighting. "We have to get out and do it fast."

"Do what?"

"You have to kill a deer if Cole is ever going to forgive you."

Jax's face dropped as panic shot through him. "No, no. I c-c-can't do it," he stuttered.

I yanked his blanket off and pulled him out of the bed. "Yes, you can, Jax. You're just scared."

"I'm not," he lied. He was terrified.

"Yes, you are. Now, come on. Do you really want to be the reason Mom leaves Cole? You want your parents to break up?

"No."

"Then come on."

“We can’t even get the guns. Dad keeps them locked up.”

I dangled Cole’s set of keys in front of his face. “I got it. Come on, now before they realize we aren’t in bed.”

Jax stood still for a moment, and I groaned, slapping the palm of my hand to my forehead. “Jax, now’s the time. Be scared forever, or just fucking do it,” I said, my eyes piercing into his. His stare looked so gentle, like Mom’s. He was soft like her, too. Emotional. Cole said they were too emotional for their own good.

“Don’t you want Cole to love you like he loves me?” I pestered.

That got him to stand up.

I dragged him out of the bedroom and made him toss on his tennis shoes. He followed me to the shed, where we got the guns. “Take Cole’s gun,” I ordered. “He’ll be impressed to hear you killed a deer with his favorite gun.”

Once we got outside, I made sure Jax steadied the gun. He was shaking so damn much.

It was dark and I knew he hated the dark. There wasn’t much Jax wasn’t afraid of, that was for sure.

All we had for light was the lantern I brought with us, with a flickering candle. I figured a flashlight would scare the deer off too much.

I had my gun, too, just in case Jax needed help.

All he had to do was kill the deer. All he had to do was pull the trigger and Cole would like him. Then everything would go back to normal. Mom and Cole would stop fighting, and we’d be able to stay a family.

I used the lantern to help us see the deer moving through the trees. Cole taught me you had to be patient when catching a beauty like the whitetail deer.

So, we waited, and waited, and waited some more.

Finally, it showed up. The deer was big. Almost two sizes bigger than the one I shot last fall.

“There you go, Jax. He’s a beaut! Line it up,” I ordered, even though Jax’s hands were shaky.

Then, we heard the voice in the woods, calling out to us both. “Jax! Derek!”

Mom.

She was coming.

She knew we were gone.

Fuck.

“Do it!” I whisper-shouted, making Jax jump, and knock the candle over from freight.

“Geez, Jax, come on! You got this, just pull the trigger. Pull the trigger, pull the—”

The shot was heard, and Jax dropped the gun from his grip.

We heard a scream.

The gun dropped from my hands, and I tried my best to look into the darkness. I heard sobbing as I rushed through the darkness toward the cries. As I reached the noise, a rush of panic shot through me as I saw blood painting the grass and branches around me. I stared down into a pair of doe eyes, which were wide with panic.

“Mom!” I shouted. Jax rushed over, terrified like me.

“Boys,” Mom breathed out, shaking with her words as tears streamed down her cheeks.

What?

How?

No…

Jax’s hands scooped hers into mine as I began screaming. “Help!” I shouted, panic hitting every inch of my being. My chest rose and fell erratically as I felt as if my heart was being ripped from inside my chest.

“It’s okay, baby,” Mom cried, squeezing her hands in Jax’s.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Jax sobbed.

Her words faded off as the darkness of the night began to swallow me whole.

No, no, no…

“What did I do?!” Jax cried as panic set in my chest. It was all my fault.

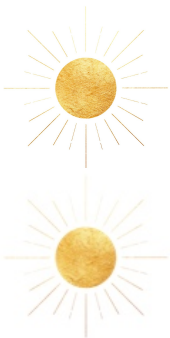
Tears flooded my eyes as he stared down at Mom. “Oh my god,” I cried out, pacing back and forth. It wasn’t him. It wasn’t him.

Tell him that it was my gun. Tell him I pulled the trigger. Be fucking brave!

But I couldn’t. I couldn’t push the words out.

I said the one thing that should’ve never left my lips as my little brother sobbed with our mother in his arms. “Jax,” I cried out, my voice strained. “What did you do?”

38



Kennedy
Present day

No words came to me as Derek unfolded his story.

He continued to fall apart in the middle of the daisies, and I shook my head. “You have to tell him the truth.”

“No, I can’t. I can’t…it will kill him,” he choked out. “He’ll never forgive me.”

“That doesn’t matter, Derek. He’s been through hell, living his whole life with this pain and guilt for something he didn’t even do! You own him that much! You don’t deserve to keep this from him. And I’m sorry, if you don’t tell him, I will.”

“What’s going on?” a voice asked from behind us. I turned to see Jax standing there, looking confused. “Derek, are you okay? Is it because of Dad passing away?” he asked so sincere.

Derek shook his head. “I’m sorry, Jax.”

“It’s okay. Whatever it is, it’s okay.” He walked over to his brother, completely ignorant to the reason behind Derek’s tears. He hadn’t a clue why his brother was falling apart, but he gave him comfort. A comfort I didn’t believe he deserved.

“Tell him,” I ordered Derek, who’s guilt was plastered all over his face.

“Tell me what?” Jax asked. “What’s going on.”

Derek lowered his head and kept apologizing. The words felt less authentic every time they left his mouth.

“Sorry for what?” Jax questioned. “What the hell is going on?”

Derek took a deep breath and revealed everything to his brother. The words burned as they fell off Derek’s tongue and hit Jax’s soul.

Jax stepped farther away from his brother. “No. You let me…” He closed his eyes tight and took in a deep breath. “I spent my whole life thinking I was the one who…”

“I know,” Derek confessed, nodding his head. “I know. I can’t take it back, and I’m sorry. I ran away all those years ago because I couldn’t face what I’d done, Jax. I was a coward. I was fucked up in the head and I left. I regret it every day of my life.”

“Every time I called you, you told me it wasn’t my fault. You tried to hammer it into me. You tried to hit me over the head with the fact that I shouldn’t blame myself, and I never understood why. I thought you were trying to comfort me, but the truth was you were trying to confess.”

Derek kept crying, and Jax stood still.

I didn’t know what to do, what to say, how to make anything better. I was almost certain Jax was about to snap. I would’ve lost my mind if those truths were revealed to me. But to my surprise—to everyone’s surprise—he stayed calm.

“Give it to me,” Jax told his brother. “This land—give it to me. I don’t want anything else from you. You owe me that much. I don’t want your time and I don’t give two shits about your apologies, but you give me this, and then we move on.”

“It’s yours,” Derek said, his shoulders rounded forward as he surrendered. “It’s yours.”

Derek walked away, still mumbling his apologies.

I rushed over to Jax’s side and took his hands in mine. “I can’t imagine what you’re feeling. I can’t even think about what’s going through your mind right now, but I just want you to know I’m here for you. I’m here, Jax, and I’m not leaving your side.”

He closed his eyes and lay his lips against my forehead. He pulled me into him and held on tight. “Everything’s a mess.”

“I know.”

“But I still have you.”

“Yes. Jax, I’m here, no matter what, I’m here.”

“I love you, Kennedy.”

“I love you, too.”

I knew it wasn’t going to be easy. I knew there was a lot Jax was going to have to work through, but I was going to be there for him. I was going to hold his hand throughout all the storms that came his way.

---

* * *

I stayed by Jax’s side the following days which turned into weeks. He was struggling with dealing with the truth of the accident from all those years back. Derek had reached out to him time and time again to try to fix their relationship, but Jax didn’t answer his calls.

“I’ll have to talk to him some day,” he said, “I just don’t think that day is today.”

More than understandable.

After what he’d been through, I wouldn’t blame Jax if he never spoke to his brother again, but I knew Jax. His love was bigger than his hate. His relationship with his brother would never be the same again, but I knew at some point he’d reach out to him.

For the time being, he began working on the landscaping of his property, with mine and Connor’s help, of course. It seemed getting his hands into the earth’s soil was healing for him. Each time he dug up a spot of his past, it felt as if he was discovering a new kind of future. Something that could be beautiful and healthy. He was finally finding a way to begin again.

I was doing the same.

Eddie—or, well he was Dr. Jefferson that afternoon—handed me yet another tissue to wipe away my tears. I’d been seeing him twice a week for the past three weeks, and our sessions always ended with me in tears.

“This is good, Kennedy. Getting your emotions out is a very healthy thing,” he encouraged. I knew he was right, even though some days it felt very difficult to do. I was getting better at working through my panic attacks with some tips and tricks he’d given me.

“Whenever you see another child, maybe say the word ‘Daisy’ in your mind. Think of those as moments of your daughter sending you her love, instead of making it out to be a moment of loss. She can live in every single moment, and if you allow it, that can be a beautiful blessing.”

I'd been trying his process for some time now, and even though it didn't always work, sometimes I'd end up smiling. Then, I'd share stories about Daisy with the people I loved, the people who were always willing to listen.

That afternoon as I left the therapy session, Jax was waiting for me outside the building.

"Tears?" he asked with a small smile on his lips.

"You know it." I laughed. "Would it be therapy without Eddie making me cry?"

"He's pretty good at his job," Jax agreed.

I narrowed my eyes and poked him in the chest. "Maybe you should get back to allowing him to be good at his job with you, too."

He kissed my forehead and pulled me into his side. "We can't both get better at once, Sun. We need at least one unstable partner in this relationship," he joked.

I paused my steps. "Seriously, Jax. Are you doing okay? I mean, I know you say you're okay, but are you really?"

"I'll get there. I promise. It's just going to take me one day at a time. I just have to keep getting up in the morning and wanting more for my life. So far, so good."

I smiled. "Good."

"Yup. One step in front of the other. That's all I can really do."

I planned to take every single step right there beside him. As long as we kept moving forward, I knew we'd be all right.

"Now, can we get to this damn party? I promised Connor I wouldn't miss it." Jax tossed me his keys and headed to the passenger seat of his truck. He'd been letting me drive it around whenever I asked him so I could get more comfortable behind the wheel. We never drove anywhere further than ten minutes, but lucky for us, nowhere in Havenbarrow took longer than ten minutes to get.

Today was Connor's big birthday bash, and by big I meant huge. Connor was loved by pretty much everyone in town. The whole town's center was shut down as if a huge festival was in town. There was a Ferris wheel rented, carnival games, and a tilt-a-whirl ride.

Everyone in town showed up to celebrate Connor's eighteen birthday, which was pretty much Jax's idea of hell. He still hated the people in town—but he loved Connor more than he'd ever

admit.

We parked the truck—which I drove perfectly may I add—and Jax grabbed Connor's gift from the backseat.

People were running around the festival laughing, hollering, and stuffing their faces with cotton candy and popcorn. It was all so over the top and wonderful. Connor deserved such a celebration.

When Connor said it was a twenty-five-dollar entry fee for his birthday, he wasn't kidding. There were two teenagers taking the money in at the main gate. I left him a fifty—I was feeling extra wild and giving since I'd finished the first draft of my manuscript. Sure, my agent might not had been able to sell the book to a publisher, and I might've had to keep tapping into my savings for a while, but it felt good to be back on track with my dreams and goals.

"Partner, you made it!" Connor said, rushing over to Jax and me with the biggest grin on his face. That wasn't the only thing on his face. It turned out there was a face painter at his party and Connor had officially become a tiger. I hoped he never changed too much. His spirit was too bright to ever disappear.

Jax smiled. "I couldn't break our deal. Happy birthday." He handed Connor his gift.

"I hope you gave me this and my one hundred dollars you owe me."

"Yeah, yeah, punk. I paid the girls on my way in."

Connor hurried to open his gift, and he burst out laughing when he saw what was inside. I couldn't help but raise my eyebrows at the oddity of the present.

"Holy fuck!" Connor exclaimed.

"Language," Jax said.

"No way, Jax. I'm now eighteen so I can say whatever the fuck I want. But seriously, this is the best gift ever."

I raked up an eyebrow. "Are those…anal beads?"

"They sure are." Connor grinned ear to ear. "Tell me the truth, Jax. Are these Eddie's?"

"Wait, what?!" I gasped.

"Never mind," they said in unison.

You know what? I'd go ahead and let that thought die off. The last thing I needed to do was burst into tears at my next therapy session as I thought about Eddie using anal beads.

"I also got you this," Jax said, pulling out his wallet.

Connor wiggled his eyebrows. “More money?”

“No, but I think you might like it.” He handed him a business card, and within seconds, Connor got emotional.

He waved the card in the air. “Serious?”

“Yup.”

Connor handed the card over to me to show what was making him so emotional. I read it out loud. “Kilter & Roe Landscaping: Two Men and a Hoe.” Classy. I liked it.

“You really want to start up another business with me?” Connor asked.

“It would be an honor.” Jax held his hand out toward him. “What do you say, partner?”

“I say hell fucking yeah!” Connor jumped around with excitement. “Oh! I almost forgot the best news I had to tell you about my mom. She’s in remission. The cancer is officially gone.”

Jax’s eyes welled with tears as he tossed his arms around Connor and flung him around from excitement. “Fuck yeah!” he hollered.

Connor laughed. “Language, Jax! Anyway. I’ve finally saved up enough to take her to Disney World this winter, and I wanted to invite you both to come with me. You know, I need my partner there to experience the happiest place in the world.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Jax said, grinning so wide. At that moment I was reminded of something so important about life. I was reminded that even though there were dark moments, there were ones filled with light, too. Connor’s mother found a happy ending, and I knew there were so many more happy endings to come in our lives. I was looking forward to all of the moments with Jax. The ups and the downs.

“Just to be clear, I’m not paying for you both, so you better start saving up. I want you there, but I’m not your meal ticket,” Connor joked before hurrying off to talk to other people.

Jax pulled me into a hug and held on tight. As we stared out into the crowd, my heart filled up with joy as I saw a little girl shoving her face full of cotton candy.

“Daisy,” I muttered to myself.

“What did you say?” Jax asked, smiling my way.

“Nothing.” I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his lips. “Just felt a wave of love, that’s all.”

Went spent the rest of the night losing our money at the carnival games and whirling around on the Tilt-A-Whirl. When I went home

with Jax that night, I couldn't help but feel grateful. So much had happened in my life, and even through it all, I was still able to smile. I was thankful for all the rainstorms that brought me back to him.

* * *

"Do you want to read them?" I asked Jax, after we made it home from the carnival. We sat on his bed with the shoebox of old letters that we'd sent each other. For the past few days, we'd been debating what to do with them.

He shook his head. "I don't think so. When I wrote those letters, I was in a very dark place. I've relived that place for so many years of my life, and I'm tired of that story. I want to move on, and that means getting rid of those letters." He pulled me in closer to his body. "We have the rest of forever to leave each other love notes."

I kissed his lips when the doorbell rang. "Expecting someone?"

"Never," he said as he stood to go answer it. I followed closely behind him to see who it could be.

When he opened the door, we were both surprised to see Amanda standing there with a box in her hands. Her eyes landed on me before she gave Jax a weak smile.

"Hey, sorry to interrupt your night. I figured it was about time I return your stuff you left at my place. I don't know why I held on to it for so long, but here it is," she said, passing it over to Jax.

"Thanks," he said.

"Yeah. And I'm sorry about what happened at the bar. Lars was wrong for what he did. He's a jerk sometimes. You didn't deserve that." She kept fidgeting with her fingers and avoiding eye contact. "You deserve to be happy."

"You do, too, Amanda. You deserve more than Lars."

"Maybe." She nervously laughed. "Only time will tell." She looked toward me and gave me a broken smile. "Take care of him, will you? This man doesn't love easily. For a while, I thought he didn't love at all, but I see it when he looks at you. You make him whole. You were his missing piece. So, can you do me a favor?"

"What's that?" I asked.

She smiled to us both and released a weighted sigh. "Stay."

39

Jax

Kennedy refused to leave my side throughout all of my hardships. She stayed during my darkest moments, and promised she wasn't going to go anywhere without me. Day by day, she opened up my heart, and she didn't seem afraid by what she saw.

When it came time for some deeper healing, I knew exactly where I had to go.

"Well, I'll be. I'll admit when I saw your name on my schedule, I thought it was a typo," Eddie said as I walked into his office.

I snickered a little and took my very familiar seat across from his desk. "Yeah, well, what can I say? I like to keep people on their toes." It had been a few weeks since Derek came into town and I was still trying to deal with the truths he revealed to me. Each day came with its own struggles and I had gone through every emotion out there, but I didn't have to deal with them alone anymore. I didn't have to feel what I felt in the dark, because Kennedy was there to be my light.

Truthfully, I had a whole team around me to help guide me home whenever I started to slip away, and that included my therapy appointments with Eddie. If anything, I learned what it meant to conquer ones demons. It wasn't something you did, and then it magically disappeared forever. No, life was determined to

throw shit your way, no matter how hard you tried to stay in the realm of happiness.

But I'd discovered quickly how important it was to learn to fight back.

That was the thing about storms. When you were in the middle of them, they felt so powerful. They felt as if they were driving your life, and you were left with no control over the way the winds blew you. That was why it was so important to have a core group of love surrounding you at all times. When you faced the storms together, when you held the hands of the ones you loved, and stood steady, the storms had a harder time pushing you over. The storms didn't blow you away because you were linked to the world with love, the most powerful weapon that could be used during the mightiest of storms.

And when the storm passed? You were left standing with the ones you loved, staring out at the rainbows. Kennedy was what grounded me. Her hand in my hand kept me still, and with her love, I survived the hardest of my storms.

Eddie and I spoke for a while. We went over my allotted time, but he didn't seem to mind, and when it came time for me to leave, he sat back in his chair, staring at me with tears in his eyes.

I snickered. "Are you getting emotional on me, Doc?"

"It's just…" He cleared his throat, took off his glasses, and wiped at his eyes. "This is good. This is amazing, Jax. It's been an honor to watch you become the man you are today. You are the definition of healing. You put in the work, and it shows."

I felt it, too. I felt the healing, felt myself becoming whole again.

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* * *

I called Derek down to Havenbarrow, telling him I needed to go over some paperwork about transferring the property over to me. Even though that wasn't the real reason I called him. I figured it was time we truly talked over everything that happened.

When he arrived at the house, he looked broken down and full of guilt. Before he could let another apology slip through his lips, I told him not to say it.

"Just come inside," I told him, heading into the house. He followed behind me.

The moment he stepped into the living room, he paused and raised an eyebrow. “What’s going on?”

Around the space were cans of paint and materials to fix the house up. I sat down on the couch across from him and clasped my hands together. “I’m tired of hard stuff. I’m tired of trying to figure out why you did what you did, and how my life could have been different if you told the truth. I’m tired of trying to hate you. I’m tired of feeling bad for you and the shit you’ve been carrying on your shoulders. I’m tired of the past, Derek. So, I’m fixing up the holes around this place. I’m removing all the memories of what Dad did to me. I’m filling up the holes that remind me of everything that happened before, and I want you to help me.”

He cleared his throat and crossed his arms. “I don’t expect you to forgive me, Jax.”

“Yeah, I know, but I will someday. It will take a bit of time. For now, I just need your help painting these walls.”

We didn’t have to figure everything out right then and there. We didn’t have to hug and make up with one another. We didn’t have to fix our scars because they were still badly bruised, but we could paint together. We could cover up the past and bring about a brighter future. Healing came in waves, and I was willing to ride this one out.

* * *

A week later, Derek headed back to Chicago. We left on decent terms, that I figured would only get better. You could only go up from rock bottom. Yet, I also knew it would take more than a week of drywalling to fix our problems.

After he left, I headed to Kennedy’s house one Sunday afternoon. She was off having a spa day with Yoana, which was at my request. When I stepped into her back yard, Connor was putting the finishing touches on our landscaping design. We’d hung fairy lights the night before, and now that the night sky was approaching, everything was beginning to light up perfectly. Kennedy hadn’t seen anything yet, because I wanted the yard to be the biggest surprise. I wanted to be there when she witnessed the completed picture.

In the trees hung paper butterflies, her daughter’s favorite. In the bushes bubble machines were going nonstop, and on the left

side of the fence was a field of daisies beneath a sign that read *Daisy's Flowers* with a backward D.

Connor walked over and patted me on the back. "Are you happy with how it turned out, boss?"

I smiled at him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "It's everything and more, partner."

Connor looked up at me and grinned ear to ear. The truth of the story was, that kid had been the best partner I could've ever asked for. His humor and kindness had probably saved me on the hardest days of my life. I was thankful to be able to know someone like him.

"Promise me you won't forget me when you become a millionaire, Con?" I asked.

"Don't be silly, Jax." He shook his head. "I'm going to be a *billionaire*. I'll probably end up buying your business out from under you, but I'll cut you a nice check."

I snickered. Sounded about right.

"You guys, get ready, get ready," Joy said, hurrying to the back yard. "Yoana and Kennedy are on their way back."

My stomach was in knots, and I couldn't help but laugh as I saw Yoana round the corner, guiding a blindfolded Kennedy.

"Why am I having a strong case of déjà vu?" Kennedy laughed. "Yoana, I already know what the house looks like. Is the blindfold really necessary?"

"It is," I told her.

Kennedy stood straighter. "Jax?" she questioned. "What are you doing here?"

"We wanted to surprise you with the finished back yard." I walked over to her and kissed her lips. "Are you ready?"

"I am!" she exclaimed. "I've been waiting for this."

"Okay, and just remember, if you hate it, Connor did it," I joked. I took the blindfold off Kennedy's eyes, and she gasped upon seeing everything around her.

"Oh my gosh." She teared up, looking around. When she looked at the trees and saw the butterflies, the tears began to fall. Then they began rushing down her cheeks as she saw the sign, and they never finished falling. Yoana cried from her sister's emotions, and hell, I almost teared up too, because seeing Kennedy happy made my heart soar.

"Do you like it?" I asked.

“Like it? Jax, it’s everything and more. I never imagined something so beautiful. This is more than I could’ve ever imagined.”

I took her hand into mine and led her around. “Come on, let me show you.” I pointed out all the little details she probably didn’t even care to know about, but I was excited, and nervous, and fuck, it was hard to breathe.

I led her over to the bed of daisies and pointed down at the flowers. “These are special daisies. Rumor has it some are great at growing objects within them.”

She laughed. “What does that even mean?”

“Just look closely and see if you can figure it out.”

She narrowed her eyes at me then lowered herself down. She began looking through the flowers for whatever it was she was meant to find. “There’s nothing here,” she said, confused.

“That’s because I already picked it out of the bunch,” I said.

She turned around to find me down on one knee with a daisy in my hand. On top of said flower was a diamond ring, waiting for her finger to wear it.

Kennedy’s hand flew to her lips, and she let out a small gasp. “Jax…”

“Kennedy, the first time I saw you, I knew you were special. Sure, a little weird, but that was what made me fall in love with you.” She giggled through her shaky hands. “You are the definition of powerful. You are the brightest part of my day. Your love heals the cracks in my heart that I thought were doomed to be broken forever. You are my best friend, my soul mate, and my favorite flower, and if you allow me to do so, I’d love to be the one to make you smile for the rest of my life. Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” she cried, pulling me up from the ground. She began planting kisses all over my face, making me laugh.

“You have to let me put the ring on, I think,” I joked.

“Oh, right! Of course.” She held her hand out, and everyone cheered around us. I couldn’t believe how my life had changed. It felt as if all the pieces were placed back together and the storm had finally passed to bring about better days.

I knew life would have its troubles, but I also knew I’d be okay because I was surrounded by love, by friendship, by Kennedy. She was my sun, I was her moon, and for the rest of our lives, we’d remember to dance in the rain.

Epilogue

Jax
Three years later

“Oh my gosh, Kennedy, I always knew you were something special! Didn’t I say that the first time we’d met her, Kate? Didn’t I go on and on about how special Kennedy was?” Louise swooned as she stood in front of a table across from my wife.

My wife.

I loved the sound of that.

It was amusing watching Louise, along with everyone else in town, swoon over Kennedy at the book signing in Havenbarrow for her most recent successful novel. Over fifteen months ago, Kennedy signed a deal with a major publishing company. When her book, *Trespassing*, hit the shelves, it became an instant success.

Kennedy cried the day Oprah’s Magazine included it on their ‘must read’ list. She just about vomited when she hit the New York Times—where she stayed for ten months so far.

After some convincing from the townspeople, Kennedy agreed to do a local signing, and the twins were the first in line.

While Kennedy could’ve been nasty toward the women who had been nothing but cruel to her since the day she arrived, she wasn’t. She was kind, thankful, and showed so much gratitude. Sometimes, I wished she could’ve been an asshole like me, but alas, she was the

sun. She was *my* sun. I fell in love with the sun, and she kept my cold heart warm.

"Thank you for coming, ladies, but I think I'm going to have to cut this signing short," Kennedy said, standing up. There was a huge line going out the door of Gary's café. People began groaning at the idea of Kennedy leaving, seeing how they hadn't gotten their books signed yet.

I raised an eyebrow at her, confused at what she was doing.

"I know, I'm sorry everyone, and I'll be sure to reschedule the first chance I get. It's just that, my water just broke, so I think we have to get to the hospital," she explained.

Oh. Right. That made sense.

I stared at her blankly for a few seconds before her words clicked in my head.

Oh!

Right!

That made sense!

We were having a baby! Well, she was having the baby, I was along for the ride at this point. Ride. Truck. Keys. Baby! Oh hell, I was panicking.

"Don't panic," Kennedy said, walking my way with her hands on her stomach.

"Panic? Why would I be panicked? I'm not panicked! I just need my keys," I said, patting my pockets. "Keys, keys, I need my key—"

"Here," she said, dangling them in my face. "I drove here, remember?"

"Right, of course. Okay. Let's go." I shot out of the front door, leaving her behind, until I realized that I left my very pregnant, very in labor wife behind. I dashed back inside. "I forgot; I need you to come with me."

She giggled as she controlled her breathing. "Yes, I think you do."

We got to the hospital, and everything went smoothly. Except for the part where I blacked out, but we didn't need to talk about that.

After twelve hours of hard work from my beautiful wife, we were able to hold our beautiful daughter.

Elizabeth Daisy Kilter.

Named after my mother and her daughter, of course.

Elizabeth was a dream come true, and when I held her for the

first time, I knew I was never going to be able to let her go.

"She's perfect," I said, rocking her back and forth in my arms. I looked at my exhausted wife and kissed her forehead. "You're perfect."

Every dream I'd ever had, came true that day. I was with the love of my life staring into our child's eyes, and I couldn't ask for more. I knew each day that was to come was a blessing, and I promised myself I'd never take that for granted. I was going to live every single day as if it were my last—which meant I would show my family how much I loved them time and time again.

Especially my wife. My sun. My very best friend.

Friends forever.

Lovers for life.

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* * *

Five Years Later

"Daddy, can I have a granola bar?" Elizabeth asked as we tracked through the woods finishing up one of our longer hikes. The sun was beginning to set, and we always loved to watch it happen from the convertible we'd placed between the trees.

The old, yellow vehicle had many additions of artwork added to it since Kennedy and I reconnected many years ago. Joy drew a picture celebrating her ninety-fifth birthday last month. Nathan and Yoana added a drawing of their sweet newborn, Elijah last year. And just recently we had Elizabeth create a picture of her first day of school.

Watching the car grow with memories was one of my favorite things to witness.

As we reached the car, we all climbed inside the back seat to watch the sky fade to night.

"Didn't you already have a granola bar?" Kennedy asked Elizabeth with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, Mama, but that's why I asked Daddy because he always says yes to me even when you say no," she said matter-of-factly.

The girl wasn't wrong. I had a very hard time saying no to my

little sweetheart. It was the eyes, I swore. She had her mother's eyes.

"Well, how about we hold off on the granola until we get some dinner inside you," Kennedy said.

Elizabeth threw a fit of course, but when she realized we weren't going to give in, she released the biggest sigh in the world. "Being a kid is hard," she groaned.

"I bet." I laughed and pulled her into my lap. "Don't worry, someday you'll be a grownup and you can eat all the granola bars you want."

Her eyes lit up. "Really?"

"For sure."

"Even the ones with chocolate chips?" she asked.

"Even those," Kennedy nodded, kissing Elizabeth's forehead.

As we watched the sky, Elizabeth always loved to point out the moon when we could see it. "There it is! There! That's you right, Daddy? You're the moon?"

I smiled. "Yup. I'm the moon."

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. "And Mama's the sun?"

"Exactly," I said.

"Does that mean Daisy and me can be the stars?" she asked, looking up to the sky once more.

That made my heart almost burst out of my chest.

Kennedy's eyes watered over as a smile fell against her lips. "Yes, sweetheart. You and your sister can be the stars."

Every single day we told Elizabeth the stories of her loved ones. We told their stories to keep them alive forever, and it warmed my heart knowing that Elizabeth understood that even though people passed away, they were never truly gone—not as long as we held them close to our hearts. That night, our loved ones were close to us. I could feel them in the wind. I could feel their love and protection every time I looked up toward the sky.

That night we sat beneath the sky, and the stars all shined so bright.

First Dance

Kennedy
Twelve years old
Year two of summer camp

“What do you want to be when you grow up, Jax?” I asked as we sat on the dock looking out at the water. We’d been skipping rocks until we ran out of rocks to skip, so now we were sitting on the dock being bored as ever. It was one of the slower days at camp, where there wasn’t much to do. At least I had Jax to do nothing with, that always made it better.

Plus, I did run off to steal some popsicles from the dining hall, so we had those to enjoy.

The sky was full of clouds, and I knew a storm was coming soon. I was so excited for it, too. I loved when it rained. Jax wasn’t a big fan of storms, but I always told him they’d grow on him.

“I don’t know. I don’t really think about the future like that,” he replied, licking his popsicle. “What do you want to be?”

“I think I want to write books and I want to use all the big words that you taught me. I want my books to be so big and so good that they make people happy when they finish them. I want people to be so excited with the idea of waiting for another book from me. And, and, and each book will have a word you taught me, so it’s like you’re always a part of the books, too.”

For a second, I thought he was going to laugh at me and call my dream stupid, but he just did his Jax thing. He stayed calm as he licked his popsicle fast enough, so it never made his hands messy. Then, he said, “I’ll read every book five million times.”

I smiled.

“Hey, Jax?”

“Yes, Kennedy?”

“Will we still be friends in the future?”

“Friends forever,” he replied.

“And ever.”

He rested his free hand on the dock, and I rested mine right there beside him. His pinky brushed against mine, and I felt it in my heart.

I loved Jax Kilter, and someday, I hoped, he’d love me, too.

But that didn’t matter to me too much that night. We were still kids. We had all of forever to fall in love with each other. It didn’t have to happen that night. That night, all we had to do was sit on the dock and wait for the rain to come.

When the rain began to fall, I stood on the dock and began my wild dance moves. I jumped and wiggled and twisted and turned. I couldn’t believe what happened next.

For the first time since I’d met him, Jax danced with me, too.

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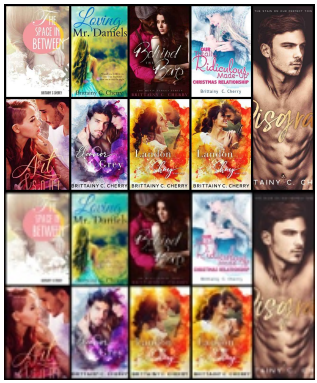

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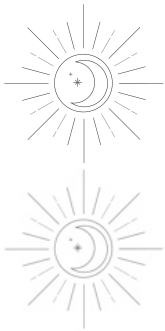

This book is for my family—my tribe. They have held me up throughout all of the ups and downs on this career and I wouldn't still be here if it wasn't for their love and support.

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Until next time.

-BCherry

About the Author

Brittainy C. Cherry is an Amazon #1 Bestselling Author who has always been in love with words. She graduated from Carroll University with a Bachelor's degree in Theatre Arts and a minor in Creative Writing. Brittainy lives in Brookfield, Wisconsin. When she's not running a million errands and crafting stories, she's probably playing with her adorable pets or traveling to new places.

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